ソードアート・オンライン1

アインクラッド

クリアするまで脱出不可能、ゲームオーバーは本当の“死”を意味する――。謎の次世代MMO『ソードアート・オンライン（SAO）』の“真実”を知らずログインした約一万人のユーザーと共に、その過酷なデスバトルは幕を開けた。

SAOに参加した一人である主人公・キリトは、いち早くこのMMOの“真実”を受け入れる。そして、ゲームの舞台となる巨大浮遊城『アインクラッド』で、パーティーを組まないソロプレイヤーとして頭角をあらわしていった。

クリア条件である最上階層到達を目指し、熾烈な冒険（クエスト）を単独で続けるキリトだったが、レイピアの名手・女流剣士アスナの強引な誘いによって彼女とコンビを組むことに。その出会いは、キリトに運命とも呼べる契機をもたらし――。

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REKI KAWAHARA abec bee-pee

SWORD ART ONLINE

AINCRAD

"OUR SHOP'S MOTTO IS TO BUY CHEAP AND SELL CHEAP."

EGIL § A MERCHANT STATIONED AT CITY [ALGATE], LOCATED AT LEVEL 50 OF AINCRAD.

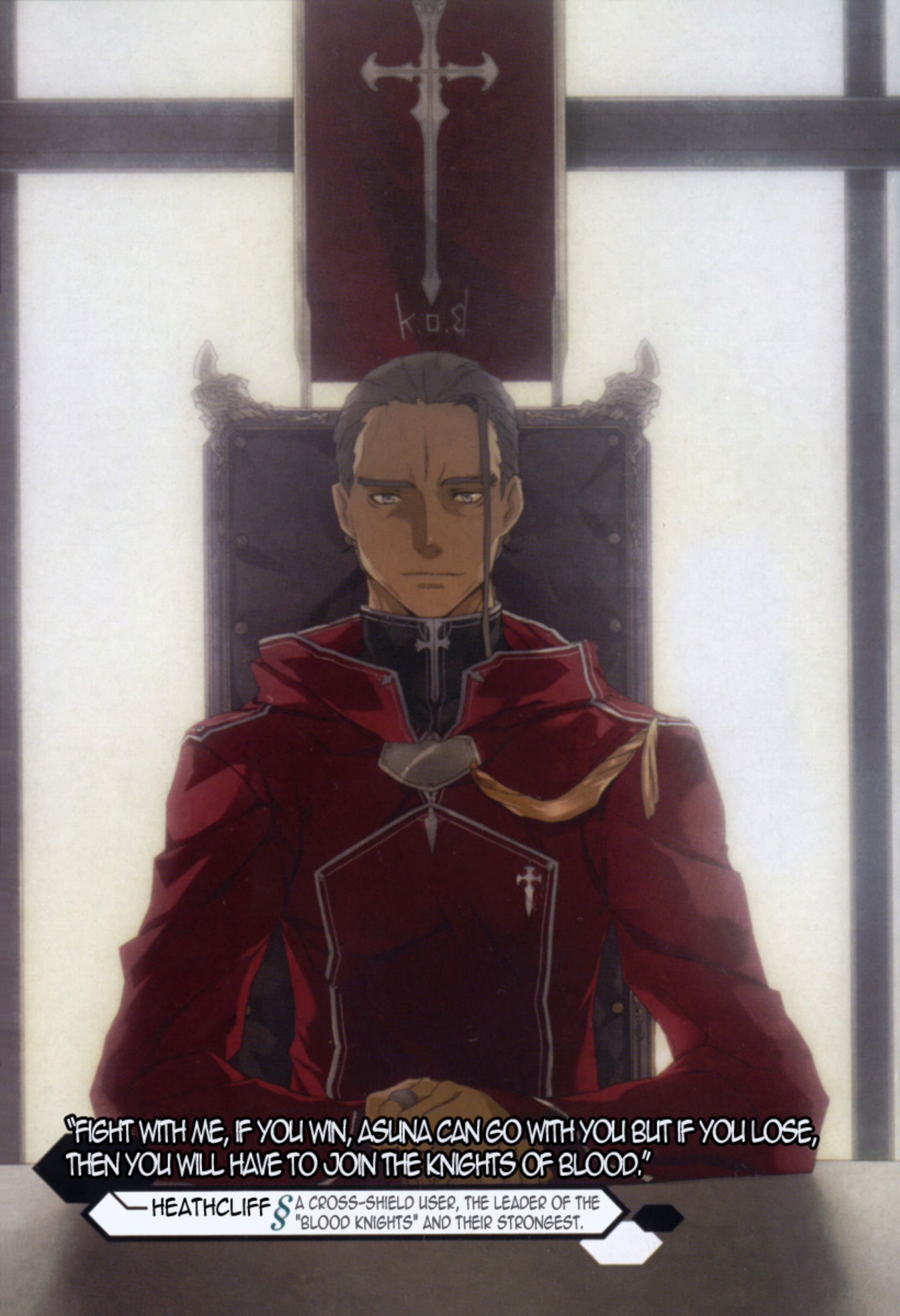
"STRANGE, ASUNA. WHY ARE YOU SHOWING YOUR FACE IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?."

KIRITO § A [SOLO PLAYER] SWORDSMAN AIMING TO REACH AINCRAD'S TOPMOST LEVEL.

„KIRITO..."

ASUNA § OF AN ACQUIRED ALIAS OF "THE FLASH", THE SUB-LEADER OF THE GUILD "BLOOD KNIGHTS"

"BETTER THAN YOU CAN, MOST LIKELY."
"...I'M GOING TO KILL YOU... I'LL DEFINITELY KILL YOU....
DO YOU THINK A PATHETIC PLAYER LIKE YOU
CAN PROTECT ASUNA-SAMA!!"
— CRADIL
A MEMBER OF THE "BLOOD KNIGHTS",
SERVING AS ASUNA'S ESCORT.



"FIGHT WITH ME, IF YOU WIN, ASUNA CAN GO WITH YOU BUT IF YOU LOSE, THEN YOU WILL HAVE TO JOIN THE KNIGHTS OF BLOOD."

— HEATHCLIFF § A CROSS-SHIELD USER, THE LEADER OF THE "BLOOD KNIGHTS" AND THEIR STRONGEST.

"D, DON'T...LOOK OVER HERE..."

GARGANTUAN GAME CASTLE
AINCRAD
A IRON-AND-STONE MADE CASTLE CONSISTING OF 100 FLOORS. INSIDE IT ARE NUMEROUS CITIES, SMALL TOWNS AND VILLAGES, FORESTS, GRASSLANDS, AND LAKES. ONE STAIRWAY CONNECTS EACH FLOOR TO THE PREVIOUS AND SUCCEEDING FLOOR, AND ALL OF THEM ARE IN DANGEROUS LABYRINTH ZONES WHERE MONSTERS WANDER ABOUT. PLAYERS IN THIS WORLD RELY ON ONE WEAPON AS THEY RUN PAST THEM, FIND THE WAY TO THE UPPER FLOORS, AND TAKE DOWN STRONG GUARDIAN MONSTERS, SINGLE-MINDEDLY AIMING FOR THE TOP OF THE CASTLE. ASIDE FROM BATTLING WITH MONSTERS, THERE ARE MANY SCOPES OF PLAY FROM MANUFACTURING LIKE SMITHING, LEATHERCRAFT AND SEWING, TO HUNTING AND CUISINE, TO MUSIC. THIS IS NOT MERELY ADVENTURING IN A VAST FIELD, [LIFE] IS LITERALLY POSSIBLE HERE.
"AINCRAD" IS THE WORLD SET AS THE STAGE FOR "SWORD ART ONLINE", DECLARED AS THE WORLD'S FIRST IN THE VRMMO GAME GENRE.

A huge castle made of stone and steel floating in an endless sky.

That was all this world was.

It took a vagarious group of craftsmen one month to survey the place; the diameter of the base floor was about 10 kilometers — large enough to fit the entirety of Setagaya-ku within. Above, there were 100 floors stacking straight upwards; its sheer size was unbelievable. It was impossible to even guess how much data it consisted of.

Inside, there were a couple of large cities along with countless small scale towns and villages, forests and plains, and even lakes. Only one stairway linked each floor to another, and the stairways existed in dungeons where large numbers of monsters roamed; so discovering and getting through was no easy matter. However, once someone made a breakthrough and arrived at a city of the upper floor, the «Teleport Gates» there and of every cities in the lower floors would be connected making it possible for anyone to move freely through these levels.

With these conditions, the huge castle had been steadily conquered for two years. The current front line is the 74th floor.

The name of the castle was «Aincrad», a world of battles with swords that continued floating and had engulfed approximately six thousand people. Otherwise known as...

«Sword Art Online»

Chapter 1

A grey sword cut my shoulder.

The thin line at the top left corner of my field of vision reduced slightly. At the same time a cold hand passed over my heart.

The blue line—called the “HP bar”—is a visual rendering of my life force. There was still a little over 80 percent left. No, this phrase isn’t appropriate enough. Right now, I was about 20 percent closer to death.

I dashed backwards before the enemy’s sword even began its attacking motion.

“Haaa…”

I forced a huge breath to steady myself. The «body» in this world didn’t need oxygen; but the body on the other side, or rather the body lying down in the real world, would be breathing heavily. My limp hands would be soaked with sweat, and my heartbeat would be off the charts.

Of course.

Even if everything that I see right now is nothing more than a rendering of a 3D virtual reality, and the bar being reduced was nothing more than a bunch of numbers that showed my hit points, the fact that I was fighting for my life didn’t change.

When you think about it like that, this fight is extremely unfair. That’s because the «enemy» in front of me — a humanoid with dully shining arms covered in dark green scales along with a lizard’s head and tail—was not a human, nor was it really alive. It was a digital lump that the system would replace however many times it was killed.

—No.

The AI that moved the lizardman was studying my movements and enhancing its ability to respond to them with every second that passed. However, the moment that this unit was destroyed, the data was reset and it did not pass on to the unit that would be regenerated in this area.

So in a sense, this lizardman was also alive — A single being unique to this world.

“…right?”

There was no way that it would have understood the word that I had muttered to myself, but the lizardman — a level 82 monster called «Lizardman Lord» — hissed and smiled, showing the sharp fangs that sprung from its long jaw.

It’s reality. Everything in this world is real. There’s no virtual reality or any fakes of any kind.

I shifted the one-handed longsword in my right hand parallel to the middle of my body and watched the enemy.

The lizardman moved the buckler in his left hand forward and pulled the scimitar to his right back.

A chill breeze blew into the shadowed dungeon and the flame on the torch shook. The wet floor softly reflected the flickering torch-light.

“Kraaah!!”

With a tremendous scream, the lizardman leapt. The scimitar drew a sharp arc as it flew towards me. A blinding orange light lit its trajectory; a high-class one-hit sword skill of the curved sword «Fell Crescent». It was a formidable charge-type sword skill that covered a distance of 4 meters in 0.4 seconds.

But, I was already expecting the attack.

I had slowly increased the distance in order to induce the AI to create this situation. I closed in on the lizardman, my mind registering the burning smell that the scimitar left behind as it sliced through the air centimeters in front of my nose.

“…ha!”

With a short shout, I swung the sword horizontally. The sword, now covered with a sky-blue light effect, cut through the thinly protected stomach and bright red light was scattered instead of blood. There was a low scream.

However, my sword didn’t stop. The system assisted me through the programmed movements and chained the next slash with a speed that would have normally been impossible.

This is the most important element in battles in this world: «Sword Skill».

The sword sped off right from left and cut into the lizardman’s chest. In this state, I spun my body in a full circle and the third strike stuck the enemy more deeply than before.

“Raarrgh!”

As soon as the lizardman recovered from the brief stun-state, after failing to hit with a big skill, it screamed with rage or perhaps fear, and raised its scimitar high up into the air.

But my chain had not ended. The sword that had been swinging right suddenly sprang, as if forced by a spring, left and up and hit its heart—a critical point.

The sky-blue rhombus drawn by my four consecutive hits flashed then scattered — A horizontal consecutive 4 hit skill, «Horizontal Square».

The clear light shone strongly in the dungeon and then faded. At the same time, the HP bar above the Lizardman's head disappeared without even a single dot left.

The huge body fell, leaving a long trail, then suddenly stopped awkwardly—

With a sound similar to breaking glass, it broke down into infinite polygons and disappeared.

This is the «Death» of this world. It is instantaneous and short, a perfect destruction, not leaving even a single trace.

I glanced at the virtual experience points and drop items I received that appeared in purple font in the center of my vision and swung my sword right and left before sheathing it in the scabbard on my back. I walked backward a few steps and slid slowly down with my back against the dungeon wall.

I spat out the breath I was holding and closed my eyes. My temple started throbbing, perhaps from the fatigue from the long fight. I shook my head a couple of times to get rid of the pain and opened my eyes.

The shining clock at the bottom right of my field of vision showed that it was already past 3PM. I should get out of the labyrinth or I won't make it to the city before dark.

"…should I get started?"

There was nobody here to listen, but I just said that and slowly got up.

I was done with making progress for the day. I somehow escaped the hand of death again today. But after a brief rest, tomorrow will come with more battles. When fighting battles without a 100% chance of victory, however many safety nets you prepare, there's going to be a day when you fall out of lady luck's favor.

The problem is if this game will be «cleared» or not, before I draw the ace of spades.

If you value your life above all else, staying in a village and waiting for somebody else to clear the game is the wisest route to take. But I go to the front lines every day solo. Am I just simply an addict of VRMMO who keeps increasing his stats through countless battles, or—

Am I an idiot who insolently believes that he can win the freedom of everyone in this world with his sword?

As I started walking towards the labyrinth entrance with a slight smile of self-scorn, I thought back to that day.

Two years ago.

The moment that everything ended, and began.

Chapter 2

“Ahh… ha… uwahh!”

The sword, swinging to these strange shouts, swished around cutting nothing but air.

Right afterwards, the blue boar, which moved surprisingly quick considering its bulk, charged fiercely at its assailant. I burst into laughter after watching him fly through the air after getting hit by the boar’s flat nose and roll on the hill.

“Hahaha…not like that. The first movement is important, Cline.”

“Argh…that bastard.”

The complaining assailant, a party member called Cline, got up and glanced at me while answering plaintively.

“But Kirito, even if you say that… I can’t do anything about the fact that it’s moving.”

I met this person, who had reddish hair held up by a bandana and simple leather armor worn over his thin body, a few hours ago. If he had revealed his real name, it would have been hard to omit the honorifics, but his name Cline and mine Kirito were both names we had made up for our characters. Putting “-san” or “-kun” at the end of them would sound comical more than anything.

The legs of the person in question started shaking.

Seems like he’s a little dizzy.

I picked up a pebble from the undergrowth at my feet and raised it above my shoulder. As soon as the system detected the first motion of a sword skill, the pebble started giving off a slight green light.

After that, my left hand almost moved by itself and the pebble went flying, drawing a straight line of light and hitting the boar between its eyebrows. Ggiik! The boar squealed in fury and turned towards me.

“Of course they move. They’re not training dummies. But if you start the right motion, the system will put your sword skill into motion and hit the target for you.”

“Motion…motion…”

While muttering this like some spell, Cline raised the cutlass that he had in his right hand.

Although the blue boar, officially named «Frenzy Boar» was a level one monster, Cline had had almost half of his HP reduced while getting hit by counterattacks due to his wild swings. Well, even if he died he’d just respawn at the «Starting City» near here, but coming all the way out to this hunting ground again was somewhat annoying.

It seemed like there was one move left before the fight reached its conclusion.

I cocked my head as I blocked the boar's charge with the sword in my right hand.

"Hmm, how should I explain… It's not like one, two, three then strike, but more like gathering a bit of energy and then. as soon as you feel the skill start, it goes BAM and you feel it hit the monster…"

"Bam, eh?"

Cline's roughly handsome face grimaced itself into an unsightly image as he leveled his sword with the middle of his body.

Breathe in, and out; after taking a deep breath, he lowered his pose and raised his sword as if he was going to shoulder it. This time, the system sensed the pose correctly and the arcing sword slowly started shining orange.

"Ha!"

With his low yell, he jumped off the ground with a movement that was completely different to the ones before. Swish-! With this crisp sound, the sword drew its flame red trajectory through the air. The «Reaver», a basic skill of the one handed curved sword, struck the boar right in its neck as it was about to charge and got rid of the rest of its HP, which, like Cline's, was about half full.

Guekk— it screamed a pitiful cry and its large body shattered like glass and purple numbers appeared, showing how much virtual experience points I gained.

"Yeeeeaaaahhh!"

Cline took an overstated pose of victory with a huge smile on his face and raised his left hand. I high-fived him and smiled again.

"Congrats on your first victory…but that boar — it's about as hard as slimes from other games."

"Eh, really? I thought it was some sort of semi-boss or something!"

"No chance of that."

My smile became a little forced as I sheathed my sword on my back.

Even though I was teasing him, I understood what he was feeling right now. Since I had two more months of experience than him, it was only now that he could feel the exhilarating feeling of destroying his enemy by his own hand.

Cline started to use the same sword skill over and over again yelling as he did so, perhaps as a way of practicing. I left him alone and looked around.

The endlessly stretching plains gave off a beautiful red as the sun had started setting. Way up north, there was the silhouette of a forest, a sparkling lake down south, and I could just about make out the walls that surrounded the city to the east. To the west, there was a limitless sky going on forever with bunches of golden clouds drifting by.

We were at the plains that stretched to the west of the «Starting City», which was situated at the north end of the first floor of the colossal floating castle—«Aincrad». There should be numerous players fighting monsters around here; but because of the enormous size, none of them were visible.

Seeming finally satisfied, Cline sheathed his sword and walked over while observing the area as well.

“But really…however many times I look around like this, I still can’t believe that this is «inside the game».”

“Well even if you say ‘inside’ it’s not like our souls were sucked in or anything. Our brain’s just seeing and listening instead of our eyes and ears…with the signals that the «Nerve Gear» is sending.”

I said while shrugging. Cline pouted his lips like a kid.

“You might be used to it now, but for me it’s the first time doing a «FullDive»! Isn’t it awesome? Really…it’s a relief that I was born in this era!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

But as I laughed, I totally agreed with him.

«Nerve Gear».

That’s the name of the hardware that moved this VRMMORPG—«Sword Art Online».

The basic structure of this machine is totally different from the older ones.

Unlike the old-style man-machine interface hardware like “flat screen monitors” or “controllers that you used with your hands,” Nerve Gear only had a single interface, a streamlined interface that covered the whole of your head and face.

Inside, there were numerous signal components, and by using the numerous electronic signals these sent, the gear accessed the user's brain itself. The user didn’t use their eyes or ears to see and listen, but took in the signals that were sent directly to their brain. In addition, the machine could access not only sight and sound, but also touch, taste, and smell as well—that is to say, all five senses.

After slipping the Nerve Gear on and locking the strap on your chin in place and saying the initiation command «Link Start», all noise fades away and you’re swathed in darkness. As soon as you pass the rainbow colored circle in the middle, you’re in another world made entirely out of data.

So,

Half a year ago, this machine, which started selling in May, 2022, successfully created a «Virtual Reality». The electronics company which created the Nerve Gear called the actual act of linking to the virtual reality—

«FullDive».

It was a total seclusion from reality, fitting of the word “full.”

The reason for this is that the Nerve Gear not only sent fake signals to the five senses—but also blocked and rerouted the orders that the brain sent to the body.

This can be called the most basic requirement for moving freely in a virtual reality. If the body received the brain's signals when the user was in FullDive, the moment the user decided they wanted to «run» their actual body would run into a wall.

Because the Nerve Gear could reroute the commands the brain sent through the spinal cord, Cline and I could both move our avatars around freely and swing our swords around.

We've completely leapt into the game.

The effect of this experience captivated me and many gamers such as myself to the point where we were sure that we could never go back to the old touch-pens or motion sensors.

Cline was staring at the wind passing through the plains and the castle walls off in the distance with actual tears in his eyes.

“So SAO is the first game for the Nerve Gear that you’ve played?” I asked.

Cline, looking like a calmly handsome warrior from the Sengoku period, turned his head my way and nodded.

“Yeah.”

If he put a serious expression on his face, he had an impressive bearing about him worthy of an actor from a historical play. Of course, this was different from his actual body in the real world. It was an avatar made out of nothing from adjusting a bunch of options.

Of course, I looked like some ridiculously handsome protagonist from some fantasy animation as well.

Cline continued in his low vigorous voice, which, of course, was different from his real voice as well.

“Well, to be exact, I sorta bought the hardware in a rush after I managed to get my hands on SAO. There was only ten thousand in the first batch. So I suppose I was really lucky. …well,

if I think about it you were ten times luckier when you got picked for beta testing. They only picked a thousand!"

"An, yeah, I suppose."

Cline kept staring at me. I unconsciously scratched my head.

I remembered the excitement and enthusiasm that «Sword Art Online» created when it was announced through the media like it was yesterday.

Nerve Gear had realized the future setting for gaming with FullDive. However, due to the innovation of the actual machine, only unremarkable titles came forth for the all-important software. They were all puzzles, education related or environmental type games, calling forth discontent from game addicts such as myself.

Nerve Gear can truthfully render a virtual reality.

But you could only walk 100 meters before you hit a wall in that world; it was really a huge letdown. That hardcore gamers such as myself, who had been deeply absorbed with the experience of being within the game, had started waiting for a certain game genre was almost unavoidable.

We had started waiting for a network response game—a sort that let millions of players log in and raise, fight with and live as a character of their own, that is to say—a MMORPG.

When the anticipation and craving reached its limit, the first VRMMORPG was announced just in time, «Sword Art Online». The stage for the game is a floating castle consisting of 100 floors.

The players lived in a world with forests and lakes, relying on only their sword and drive to discover the route to the upper floors and defeat countless monsters and make their way endlessly to the top.

«Magic» which was considered to be an indispensable part of fantasy MMORPGs had been boldly cut out and an almost endless number of skills called «Sword Skills» were made. It was part of a plan to let players actually feel the experience of fighting with their own bodies through FullDive as much as possible.

Skills were varied including productive skills such as smithery, leather working and sewing, and everyday skills such as fishing, cooking and playing music, allowing the player to not only adventure the huge game but also actually «live» in it. If they so wanted, and if their skill levels were high enough, they could buy a house and live as shepherds.

As the information steadily kept being revealed, the gamers' enthusiasm only got higher.

The beta test only recruited a thousand testers; it's said that one hundred thousand people, the number of half the Nerve Gear sold at that time, volunteered to be a tester. Luck was the only reason that I got through the narrow gap and was picked. Also, beta testers received the additional benefit of being given the priority when the game officially came out.

The two months of beta testing was like a dream. At school, I thought endlessly of my skill set, equipment and items, and ran all the way to my house as soon as school ended and dived till dawn. The beta test ended in the blink of an eye, and on the day my character was reset, I felt a sense of loss as if half of my actual self had been cut away.

And now—November 6, 2022, Sunday.

«Sword Art Online» after all the preparations had been finished and at 1PM officially started its server service.

Of course, I had been waiting for 30 minutes and then logged on without even a second delay, but when I checked the state of the server over ninety-five hundred people had already logged on. It seemed as if all of the people who had been lucky enough to get their hands on the game had felt the same as I did. All the online shopping sites announced that the game was sold out seconds after it had gone on sale and the offline sales, which had started yesterday, had created lines of people who had queued up for four days, creating enough of a racket to go on the news. That meant that all the people who had been able to buy a copy of the game were almost all serious game addicts.

The actions of Cline showed this clearly as well.

After I had logged onto SAO, I started running through the nostalgic stone paved roads of the «Starting City» to go to the weapons shop. Realizing that I was a beta tester after seeing me start and dashing without any hesitation, Cline ran over.

“Hey, teach me a few things!” he’d begged.

I wondered how he could be so shameless and demanding to a person he hadn't met before. Being so lost for words that it was almost amazement.

“Ah, er, then…why don’t we go to the weapon shop?” I answered like some NPC; we then ended up making a party, and I began teaching him some basics of fighting—and that’s how we ended up in this current situation.

To tell the truth, I didn’t get along with people in real life or in games, perhaps even less so than in real life. During beta testing, I came to know a couple of people, but I didn’t get close enough to anyone to actually call them a friend.

But Cline had a side to him that grows on you, and I didn’t find this uncomfortable either. Thinking that I might be able to get along with him, I opened my mouth.

“So…what do you want to do? Do you want to keep hunting till you get used to it?”

“Sure! …is what I want to say, but…”

Cline’s delicate eyes looked at the bottom right of his vision. He must have been checking the time.

“…well, I should log off and eat. I ordered some pizza for 5:30.”

“Pretty thorough.”

I said at a loss for words, Cline spread his chest.

“Of course!” he said proudly. “I promised to meet some mates at the «Starting City» in a bit. I could introduce you to some of them and you could register them as friends. That way you would always send messages. How about it?”

“Errr… Hmmm…,” I mumbled subconsciously.

I got along with Cline pretty well, but there was no guarantee that it’d be the same for his friends. I felt like that there would be a higher chance of not getting along with them and as a result, fall out with Cline as well.

“Should I…?”

Seemingly understanding the reason for my not-so-confident answer, Cline shook his head.

“Ah, I don’t mean to force you. There’ll be a chance to introduce them sometime anyway.”

“…yeah. Sorry, and thanks.”

As soon as I thanked him, Cline shook his head vigorously.

“Hey, hey! I should be the one thanking you. I received a lot of help from you. I’ll pay you back sometime soon. Mentally.”

Cline smiled and took another look at the clock.

“…well, I’ll log off for a bit. Thanks a lot, Kirito. Be seeing ya.”

With that, he put his hand forward. At that moment, I thought this person would have been a great leader in «another game» and shook his hand.

“Yeah, see you around.”

We let go of each other’s hand.

That was the point where Aincrad, or Sword Art Online, stopped being just some fun game for me.

Cline stepped back a bit and put his right index finger and thumb together and pulled downwards. This was the action that was done to call the «main menu window». Straight afterwards, there was a ringing sound and a shining purple rectangle appeared.

I moved a bit and sat on a rock and opened my menu too. I started to move my fingers to organize the items that I’d gotten after fighting with the boar.

Then.

“Eh?” Cline said in a strange tone.

“What’s this? …there’s no log out button.”

At that, I stopped moving my fingers and raised my head.

“No button…? No way, look a bit closer.”

I said a bit confused. The swordsman opened his eyes wide beneath the bandana and pushed his head closer to the menu. The rectangle, which was longer sideways than high, had a bunch of buttons on the left and a silhouette showing what equipment you had on on the right. At the bottom of the menu, there was a «LOG OUT» button that allowed you to escape from this world.

As I was turning my head to the item list that listed the items that I had gained over hours of fighting, Cline started speaking in an unusually high voice.

“It’s really not there. You take a look Kirito.”

“I told you that there’s no way that it’s not there…” I muttered with a sigh as I clicked on the button on the top left to go back to the menu screen.

The inventory window on the right closed and it went back to the main screen. At the left of the silhouette, which still had quite a lot of empty spaces, there was a long row of buttons.

I moved my hand down in a movement that had almost become a habit and—

My body froze.

It wasn’t here.

As Cline had said, the button that had been there during the beta test—no, even right after I’d logged on—had disappeared.

I stared at the empty space for a couple of seconds, then looked through the menu, making sure that it hadn’t just changed its position. Cline looked up with “Right?” written on his face.

“…not there, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not there.”

I nodded, although it felt slightly annoying to agree so easily. Cline smiled and started rubbing his thick chin.

“Well, it’s the first day so these sort of bugs could occur. Around about now, the GMs should be crying by now from the amount of messages flooding in,” Cline said calmly.

“Is it alright for you to stand around like that? You said that you ordered some pizza, didn’t you?” I asked teasingly.

“Ah, that’s right!”

I smiled as I watched him jump around, his eyes wide.

I threw away a couple of items I didn’t need from the inventory, which had turned red due to having too many items inside, and then walked over to Cline.

“Argh! My anchovy pizza and ginger ale-!”

“Why don’t you call a GM? They might cut you off from their side.”

“I tried, but there’s no response. It’s already 5:25! Hey, Kirito! Isn’t there some other way to log out?” After listening to what Cline said while waving both of his arms—

My face became rigid. I felt a groundless fear send a chill down my back.

“Let’s see…to log out…” I said while thinking.

To get out of this virtual reality and back to my room, I have to open the main menu, press the log out button and press yes on the window that popped up on the right. It was pretty simple. But—at the same time, apart from the procedure above I wasn’t aware of any other way of logging off.

I looked up at Cline’s face, which was situated quite a bit higher than my own, and shook my head.

“No…there’s none. If you want to log out yourself you have to use the menu, apart from that, there’s no other way.”

“That’s impossible…there’s got to be something!”

Cline suddenly starting shouting as if he was denying my statement.

“Return! Log out! Escape!”

But of course, nothing happened. There were no voice commands on SAO of that description.

After shouting this and that and even jumping, I spoke to Cline.

“Cline, it’s useless. Even the manual doesn’t have anything on emergency access terminations.”

“But…this is just stupid! Even if it’s a bug, I can’t even go back to my room and my body when I want to!” Cline shouted with a bewildered expression on his face.

I totally agreed with him.

This was impossible. It was complete nonsense. But it was indisputably the truth.

“Hey…what is this? It’s really just weird. Right now, we can’t get out of this game!”

Cline gave out a desperate laugh then quickly started talking again.

“Wait, we can just turn the power off. Or just pull the «Gear» off.”

As I watched Cline move his hands, as if he was trying to take off some invisible hat, I felt the anxiety returning.

“That’s impossible, both of them. Right now, we can’t move our bodies…our real bodies. The «Nerve Gear» receives all the signals that our brain is sending here…” I tapped the back of my head. “… and reroutes them to move our avatars here.”

Cline slowly closed his mouth and put his hands down.

We both stood speechless for a while, each lost in thought.

To attain the FullDive state, the Nerve Gear blocks the signals that our brain sends down our spines and changes them so that we can control our avatars in this world. So however wildly we swing our arm about here, the arm of my real body, which was lying on my bed right now, wouldn’t move an inch, ensuring that I wouldn’t hit my head against the corner of my table or anything.

But because of this function, we can’t cancel the FullDive of our own free will right now.

“…so unless the bug is fixed or somebody in the real world takes the Gear off, we have to wait it out?” Cline mumbled, still a little dazed.

I silently signaled my agreement.

“But I live by myself. You?”

I hesitated slightly but told him the truth.

“…I live with my mom and my younger sister, a family of three. I think that I’ll be forced out of Dive if I don’t come down for dinner…”

“What? H-How old is your sister?”

Cline suddenly looked at me, his eyes sparkling. I pushed his head away.

“You’re pretty calm right now, aren’t you? She’s part of the sports club and hates games, so she’s got nothing in common with people like us…but more than that,” I spread my right arm in an attempt to change the subject. “Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“Well sure. Since it’s a bug.”

“No, I mean it’s not just a bug, it’s an «impossible to log out» bug, it’s a big enough problem to bother the operation of the game itself. Like your pizza in the real world is getting colder every second, it’s an actual economical loss, isn’t it?”

“…a cold pizza…it’s as meaningless as hard natto!”

I ignored these meaningless comments and kept talking.

“If it’s like this, the operators should put the server down and log everyone out whatever the case. But…it’s already been 15 minutes since we’ve noticed this, but there hasn’t even been a system message, let alone putting the server down; it’s just too weird.”

“Hmm, now that I think of it, you’re right.”

Now Cline started rubbing his chin with a serious expression on his face. In the area beneath the bandana, which covered a little bit of his sharp nose, intelligence sparkled in his eyes.

I started listening to Cline, feeling a little strange about talking with someone whom I’d never meet if I erased my account.

“…the company which created SAO, «Argas», is a company that’s famous for being considerate about its users, isn’t it? That’s why everyone was fighting to get their hands on a copy even though it’s the first online game. It’s sorta meaningless if they screw up like this on their first day.”

“I agree, and SAO is the first VRMMORPG. If something goes wrong now they might put down regulations for the genre itself.”

Cline and I looked at each other’s virtual faces and sighed.

Aincrad’s seasons were based on reality, so it was early fall here as well.

I looked up, sucking in the virtual air, taking a deep, cold breath.

100 meters away, I could just about see the light purple bottom of the 2nd floor. As I followed the uneven surface, I saw the huge tower—the «labyrinth» that was the path to the upper floor—and saw that it was connected to the outer entrance.

It was just past 5:30 and the small strip of sky that could be seen was red with the light of the sunset. Despite the situation I was in, seeing the endless plains painted gold with the light of the evening sun, I found myself speechless in front of the beauty of this virtual world.

Right after that.

The world changed forever.

Chapter 3

Ding, ding, a chiming noise like a bell, or perhaps a warning bell, sounded loudly, making Cline and me jump in surprise.

"Ah..."

"What's this!?"

We shouted at the same time and stared at each other, both of our eyes wide.

Both Cline and I were immersed in a clear blue pillar of light. Past the blue veil, the plains in my vision blurred steadily.

I've experienced this a few times during beta testing. It was a «Teleport» initiated by an item. I didn't have the prerequisite item nor did I shout the proper command. Did the operators initiate a forced teleport? If so, why didn't they even inform us?

As my thoughts raced, the light around me pulsed stronger and darkness overtook me.

As the blue light faded, my surroundings became clear again. However, this wasn't the plains lit with the sunset anymore.

A large road paved with stone. Medieval streets surrounded by street-lamps and the huge palace radiating a dark light a fair distance away up ahead.

This was the starting point, the central plaza of the «Starting City».

I looked at Cline who had his mouth wide open next to me. Then at the bustling layers of people that surrounded the two of us.

Looking at the bunch of stunningly beautiful people with a variety of equipment and different hair colors, they were no doubt other players like me. There were about a few thousand—ten thousand people here. It was likely that everyone who was logged on right now had been forcefully transported to the central plaza.

For a few seconds, everyone just looked around without a word.

Then a few mumbles and mutters could be heard here and there; it started to get louder.

"What's happening?"

"Can we log out now?"

"Can't they take care of it quickly?"

Comments like these could be heard from time to time.

As the players started to get more annoyed, shouts like "Is this a joke?" and "Get the hell out here, GMs!" could be heard.

Then suddenly.

Somebody raised his voice above all these comments and shouted.

"Ah...look above!"

Cline and I almost automatically turned our eyes upward and looked. There, a strange sight greeted us.

The bottom surface of the second floor, one hundred meters up in the air, was checkered in red.

When I looked closely, I could make out that they were made up of two phrases crisscrossing each other. The word that was written in red was [Warning] and the other [System Announcement].

I was surprised for a moment but then thought *Oh, the operator's going to begin informing us now* and loosened my shoulders a little bit. The chatter died down in the plaza and you could feel everyone waiting to hear what was going to be said.

However, what happened next wasn't what I had expected.

From the middle of the pattern, a liquid similar to blood started oozing down slowly. It came down at a rate that almost emphasized how viscid it was; but it didn't fall down; instead, it started morphing into another shape.

What appeared was a twenty meter tall man with a hooded robe draped around him.

No, that wasn't exactly right. From where we were looking, we could easily see into the hood—there was no face. It was absolutely empty. We could clearly see the inner cloth and the green embroidery inside of the hood. It was the same inside the robe; all we could see inside the rim were shadows.

I've seen the actual robe before. It was the clothes that the Agas employees who had been working as GMs during the beta test had always worn. But then the male GMs had had a face like an old sorcerer with a long beard and the females had had an avatar of a bespectacled girl. They might have used the robe due to lack of time to prepare a proper avatar, but the empty space beneath the hood gave me an unexplainable feeling of anxiety.

The countless players around me must have felt the same.

"Is that a GM?"

"Why doesn't it have a face?"

Numerous whispers like these could be heard.

Then the right hand of the huge robe moved as if to silence them.

A pure white glove appeared from the folds of the long sleeve. But this sleeve, like the rest of the robe, wasn't connected to any sort of body.

Then the left arm slowly lifted upwards, too. Then with its two empty gloves spread out in front of ten thousand players, the faceless person opened his mouth—no, it felt like it did. Then a low and calm voice of a male resonated from high up in the air.

'Players, I welcome you all to my world.'

I couldn't understand it right away.

«My world»? If that red robe was a GM, it certainly had godlike powers in this world, enabling him to change the world at will, but why was he pointing that out now?

Cline and I looked at each other dumbfounded. The anonymous red robe lowered its two arms and continued talking.

'My name is Kayaba Akihiko. Right now, I am the only person who can control this world.'

"What...!?"

My avatar became rigid with shock, and its throat, and perhaps my neck back in the real world as well, stopped working for a second.

Kayaba—Akihiko!!

I knew that name. There was no way I didn't.

This person, who was both a game designer and a genius in the field of quantum physics, was the one responsible for raising Agas, which even a few years ago was just one of many small companies, into one of the leading companies in the field.

He was also the development director of SAO and, at the same time, the designer of the Nerve Gear.

As a hardcore gamer, I respected Kayaba deeply. I bought all the mags that featured him and had read his few interviews until I almost knew them all by heart. I could almost see him in the white overalls he always wore by just hearing his voice.

But he had always stood behind the scenes, refusing to be exposed to the media; he had never even been a GM—so why was he doing something like this?

I forced my mind to start moving again in order to make sense of the situation. But the words that came out of the empty hood almost seemed to mock my efforts to understand.

'I think that most of you have discovered the fact that the log out button has disappeared from the main menu. This is not a bug; it is all part of «Sword Art Online»'s system.'

"Part of...the system?"

Cline muttered; his voice breaking up. The announcement continued in its low voice as if to cover the sound.

'Until you get to the top of this castle, you cannot log out of your own free will.'

This castle? I couldn't understand this phrase at first. There's no castle in the «Starting City».

Then the next thing that Kayaba said blew my confusion away.

'...also, the discontinuation or dismantling of the Nerve Gear from the outside is strictly forbidden. If these things are attempted...'

A moment of silence.

The silence of ten thousand people was overwhelming. The next words came slowly.

'The signal sensors in your Nerve Gear will emit a strong electromagnetic pulse, destroying your brain and stopping all of your basic functions.'

Cline and I stared at each other for seconds in shock.

It was as if my mind was refusing to believe what had just been said. But Kayaba's short statement pierced through my body with a ferocity that was both hard and dense.

Destroy our brains.

In other words, kill us.

Any user that turned the Nerve Gear off or unlocked the clasp and took it off would be killed. That is what Kayaba had just stated.

People in the crowd started muttering, but there was no one shouting or panicking. It was either that everyone, like me, couldn't understand it yet, or refused to.

Cline raised his right hand slowly and tried to grasp the headgear that would be situated there in the real world. As he did this, he let out a dry laugh and started talking.

"Haha...what's he saying? That man, has he gone nuts? He's not making any sense. The Nerve Gear... It's just a game. Destroy our brain... How is he going to do that? Right Kirito?"

His voice broke at the last shout. Cline stared at me hard, but I couldn't nod in agreement.

The infinite signal sensors in the Nerve Gear's helmet emitted small electronic pulses to send virtual signals to the brain.

They might call this the newest ultra technology, but the basic theory was the same as a certain household appliance that's been used for over 40 years in Japan—the microwave.

If there was sufficient output, it was possible that the Nerve Gear would vibrate the water particles in our brains and fry it with the heat from the friction. But...

"...theoretically it's possible, but...he must be bluffing. Because if we pull the plug on the Nerve Gear, there's no way it can emit that sort of a strong pulse. Unless there's some form of battery with a huge storage capability...inside..."

Cline already guessed the reason why I had stopped talking.

"There...is one," he said, his words almost a scream with a hollow expression on his face. "Thirty percent of the gear's weight is in the battery. But...that's totally crazy! What if there was a sudden power outage or something!?"

Kayaba started explaining, as if he had heard what Cline had shouted.

'To be a little more specific, dislocation from an outside source of electricity for ten minutes, being cut off from the system for more than two hours, or any attempt to unlock, dismantle, or destroy the Nerve Gear. If any of these conditions are met, the brain destruction sequence will start. These conditions have been made known to the government and the public through mass-media in the outside world. On that note, there have been several cases where the relatives or friends have ignored the warnings and tried to forcefully get rid of the Nerve Gear. The result—'

The metallic voice took a short breath here.

'—regretfully 213 players have already exited this game, and the real world forever.'

A long, thin scream was heard. But most of the players couldn't believe it, or refused to believe what they had been told and just stood there slack-jawed, or with a wry smile on their faces.

My head tried to reject what Kayaba had just said. But my body betrayed it and my knees started shaking violently.

I stumbled back a few paces on my weak knees and managed to keep myself from falling. Cline fell on his backside; his expression lifeless.

213 players have already.

This phrase replayed over and over again in my head.

If what Kayaba said was true-over 200 people have already died up to now?

Among them, there would have been beta testers such as me. I might have even known some of their character names and avatars. These people had had their brains burnt and...died; is this what Kayaba was saying?

"...don't believe it... I don't believe it."

Cline, who was still sitting on the floor, started talking in a strained voice.

"He's just trying to scare us. How would he do such a thing? Stop kidding around and let us out. We don't have time to play along to your sick opening ceremony. Yeah...this is all just an event. An opening show, right?"

Inside my head, I was screaming the same thing.

But as if to dismiss our hopes, Kayaba's businesslike voice restarted its explanation.

'Players, there is no need to worry about the bodies that you have left on the other side. As of this moment, all TV, radio, and internet media are all repeatedly reporting this situation, including the fact that there have been numerous deaths. The danger of having your Nerve Gear taken off has already all but disappeared. In a moment, using the two hours I have given, all of you will be transported to hospitals or similar institutes and be given the best treatment. So you can relax...and concentrate on beating the game.'

"What...?"

Then, at last my mouth started shouting violently.

"What are you saying!? Beat the game!? You want us to play around in a situation like this!?"

I kept shouting, glaring at the red robe that had seeped out of the surface of the upper floor.

"This isn't a game anymore!!"

Then Kayaba Akihiko started announcing silently with his monotonous voice.

'But I ask of you all to understand that «Sword Art Online» is no longer a simple game. It is a second reality....from now on, any form of revival in the game will no longer work. The moment that your HP reaches 0, your avatar will be gone forever, and at the same time—'

I could guess what he was going to say all too clearly.

'Your brain will be destroyed by the Nerve Gear.'

Suddenly, an urge to laugh out loud bubbled up from the bottom of my stomach. I drove it down.

A long horizontal line was shining at the top left corner of my vision. As I focused on it, the numbers 342/342 overlaid it.

Hit points. My life-force.

The moment it reaches zero, I will die—the electromagnetic waves will fry my brain, killing me instantaneously. This is what Kayaba had said.

This is without a doubt a game, a game with your life at stake. In other words, a death game.

I must have died at least 100 times during the two months of beta testing. I had respawned with a slightly embarrassed smile on my face in the palace at the north of the main plaza, the «Black Iron Palace», and ran off into the hunting grounds again.

That was what an RPG was, a sort of game where you keep dying and learning and leveling up. But now you can't? Once you die, you'll lose your life? And in addition—you can't even stop playing?

"...no freaking way," I muttered softly.

Who in their right mind would go out onto the field with those conditions? Of course everyone would just stay inside the city where it was safe.

Then as if reading my, and maybe all the other players', mind, the next message was given.

'Players, there is only one way to be freed from this game. As I have said before, you must get to the top of Aincrad, the one hundredth floor, and defeat the final boss that resides there. All players still alive at that time will be immediately logged out of the game. I give you all my word.'

Ten thousand players stood in silence.

It was then that I realized what Kayaba had meant when he had said «get to the top of this castle».

This castle—meant the huge monstrosity that had imprisoned all of the players on the first floor with ninety nine more floors stacked on top of the others, towering into the sky while floating in it. He was talking about Aincrad itself.

"Clear...all 100 floors!?" Cline suddenly shouted. He got up quickly and raised a fist up to the sky.

"And how do you want us to do that? I heard that getting up was crazy hard even during the beta testing!"

This was true. During the two months of beta testing, the one thousand players that had taken part had only managed to get to the sixth floor. Even if ten thousand people had dived right now, how long would it take to get through all 100 floors?

Most players who had been forced here would have been asking this answer-less question.

The strained silence eventually gave way to low murmuring. But there was no sign of fear or despair.

Most people here would still be confused about whether this was a «real danger» or a «seriously warped opening event». Everything Kayaba had said was so horrifying that it felt unreal.

I craned my head back to look at the empty robe and tried to force my mind to accept this situation.

I can no longer log out, ever. I can't go back to my room, my life. The only way that I would get them back was when somebody defeated the boss on the highest floor of this floating castle. If my HP reached zero even once during that time—I would die. I would die a real death and I would be gone forever.

But.

However much I tried to accept these as facts, it was impossible. Just five or six hours ago, I had eaten the dinner that my mom had made, shared a short conversation with my sister, then walked up the floors of my house.

Now I can't go back to all that? And this is now the real reality?

Then, the red robe that had always been one step ahead of us swept its right glove and started speaking with a voice void of all emotion.

'Then I will show you evidence that this is the only reality. In your inventories, there will be a gift from me. Please confirm this.'

As soon as I heard this, I pressed my finger and thumb together and pulled downwards. All the players did likewise and the plaza was filled with the ringing sound of bells.

I pressed the item button on the menu that had just appeared and the item was there, at the top of my belongings list.

The name of the item—«hand mirror»

Why did he give us this? Even as I wondered, I tapped on the name and pressed the "make into object" button. Immediately afterward, there was a twinkling sound effect and a small rectangular mirror appeared.

I grabbed it hesitantly but nothing happened. All that it showed was the face of the avatar that I had gone through a lot of trouble to make.

I cocked my head and looked at Cline. The samurai was also looking at the mirror in his hand with a blank expression on his face.

—Then.

Suddenly Cline and the avatars around us were engulfed in white light. As soon as I took this in, I was surrounded too and all I could see was white.

Almost 2, 3 seconds later, the surroundings reappeared just as they had been...

No.

The face in front of me wasn't the one I'd gotten used to.

The armor made of metal plates sewn together, the bandana, and the spiky red hair were all the same. But the face had changed into another shape altogether. His long, sharp eyes had become sunken and shone brighter. His delicate and high nose had become hooked, and a slight beard now appeared on his cheeks and chin. If the avatar had been a young and carefree samurai, this one was a fallen warrior—or maybe a bandit.

I forgot about the situation for a moment and muttered.

"Who...are you?"

The same words came out of the mouth of the man in front of me.

"Hey...who're you?"

Then I was gripped by a sudden foreboding and realized what Kayaba's present, the «hand mirror», meant.

I raised the mirror in a rush, and the face stared back at me.

Black hair that lay neatly over the head, two weak looking eyes that could be seen beneath the slightly long hair, and a delicate face that made people mistake me for a girl even now when I go out in casual clothes with my sister.

The calm face of a warrior that «Kirito» had had even a few seconds ago was no longer there. The face that was in the mirror—

Was my actual face that I had tried so hard to escape from.

"Ah...it's me..."

Cline, who had been also staring at his mirror, fell backwards. We both looked at each other and shouted at the same time.

"You're Cline!?" "You're Kirito!?"

Both of our voices had changed too, perhaps the voice effectors had stopped working. But we didn't have time to spare on things like that.

The mirrors fell from our hands and hit the ground, then were destroyed with a quiet smashing sound.

When I looked around again, the crowd was no longer filled with people who looked like characters from a fantasy game. A bunch of normal looking young people had now taken their place. It was like something you'd see if you gathered a bunch of people in real life at a game show venue and dressed them up in armor. Distressingly, even the sex ratio had changed greatly.

How on earth was this possible? Cline and I, and most probably all the players around us, had changed from the avatars that we'd made from nothing, to our real selves. Of course, the texture itself still seemed like a polygon model and it still felt slightly strange, but it was almost frighteningly accurate. It was as if the gear had a full body scanner on it.

—Scan.

"...ah, right!" I looked at Cline and forced my voice out.

"There are high density signal sensors in the Nerve Gear covering our whole head. So it can tell not only how our brains look, but our faces too..."

"B-But, how can it know how our bodies look like... Like how tall we are?"

Cline said more silently glancing from side to side at our surroundings.

The average height of the players, who were now looking at their own and others' faces with various expressions on their faces, had been noticeably reduced after the «change». I—and most probably Cline too—had set the height to equal that of my height in the real world to prevent my extra height from hindering my movements, but most players had seemed to made themselves taller by about ten to twenty centimeters.

That wasn't all. The actual build and the horizontal length of the players had become larger too. There was no way that the Nerve Gear would have been able to know all this.

The person who answered this question was Cline.

"Ah...wait. I bought the Nerve Gear just yesterday so I remember, but there was a part of the set-up... what was it called, calibration? Well anyway, during that bit it touched your body here and there, maybe it was that...?"

"Ah, right.....that's what it was..."

Calibration was where the Nerve Gear measured «how much you had to move your hand to reach your body». This was done to reproduce the sense of feel accurately within the game. So to say, it was almost as if the Nerve Gear had data about our exact figures saved inside itself.

It was possible, making all the avatars of the players an almost perfect polygon replica of themselves. The purpose of this was also almost too clear now.

"...reality," I muttered. "He said that this was reality. That this polygon avatar...and our HP was our real body and our real life. In order to make us believe this, he's produced a perfect copy of us..."

"But...but y'know Kirito."

Cline scratched his head roughly and the eyes beneath his bandana shone as he shouted.

"Why? Why the hell's he doing something like this...?"

I didn't answer that and pointed upwards past our heads.

"Wait a moment. Most probably, he'll answer that in a bit anyway."

Kayaba didn't let me down. A few seconds later a voice, sounding almost solemn, sounded from the blood red sky.

'You will all most probably be wondering 'why.' Why am I—the creator of both the Nerve Gear and SAO, Kayaba Akihiko—doing something like this? Is this a sort of terrorist attack? Is he doing this to ransom us?'

It was then that Kayaba's voice, which had been emotionless up to now, seemed to show some signs of emotion. Suddenly the word «empathy» passed through my mind, even though there was no way that would be true.

'None of these is the reason I am doing this. Not only that, but now for me, there is no longer a reason or a purpose in doing this. The reason is because...this situation itself was my purpose in doing this. To create and watch this world is the only reason I have created the Nerve Gear and SAO. And now, everything has been realized.'

Then after a short break, Kayaba's voice, now emotionless again, sounded.

'...now I have finished the official tutorial for «Sword Art Online». Players—I wish you luck.'

This last sentence trailed off with a faint echo.

The huge robe rose soundlessly, and started sinking, hood first, into the system message that covered the sky, as if melting.

Its shoulders, then its chest, then its two arms and legs merged into in the red surface, and then a final red stain spread briefly. Right afterward, the system message that had covered the sky disappeared as suddenly as it appeared.

The sound of the wind blowing above the plaza and the BGM that the NPC orchestra was playing came softly to our ears.

The game had returned to its normal state, apart from the fact that a couple of rules had been changed.

Then—at last.

The crowd of ten thousand players gave a proper reaction.

In other words, countless voices started to resound loudly through the plaza.

"It's a joke right...? The hell is this? It's a joke right!?"

"Stop kidding around! Let me out! Let me out of here!"

"No! You can't! I've got to meet someone soon!"

"I don't like this! I'm gonna go home! I want to go home!!!!!!"

Yells. Clamors. Shouts. Curses. Begging. And screaming.

The people that had changed from game players to prisoners in a matter of minutes crouched clutching their heads, waved their arms about, grasped each other or started to swear loudly.

In the midst of all this noise, strangely my mind became cool again.

This, is reality.

What Kayaba Akihiko had declared was all true. If this was the case, this was all to be expected. It'd be strange not to. This genius was one side of Kayaba that made him alluringly attractive.

Now I can't return to reality for a while—perhaps a few months or maybe more than that. During this time, I can't see my mother or sister, nor talk to them. It was possible that I would never get the chance. If I died here—

I died in reality.

The Nerve Gear, that was once a game machine, is a lock to this prison and a tool of death that will fry my brain.

I breathed slowly in, then out, and opened my mouth.

"Cline, come over here for a sec."

I grabbed the warrior's arm, who seemed to be much older than me in real life, and made my way through the raving crowd.

We made it out of it quite quickly, maybe because we were near the edge. We entered one of the many streets that led out of the plaza in a radial pattern and I jumped into the shadow behind an unmoving carriage.

"...Cline," I called his name again.

He still had a somewhat blank expression on his face. I continued talking, trying my best to sound serious.

"Listen to me. I'm going to get out of this city and head over to the next village. Come with me."

Cline opened his eyes wide under the bandana. I kept talking in a low voice, forcing the words out.

"If what he said was true, in order to survive in this world we have to strengthen ourselves. You know that MMORPGs are a battle for resources between the players. Only the people who can acquire the most money and experience can get stronger. ...the people who've realized this are going to hunt all the monsters around the «Starting city». You'll have to wait forever for the monsters to regenerate. Going to the next village right now would be better. I know the way and all the dangerous spots, so I can get there, even if I'm only level one."

Considering that it was me, that was quite a lot of words that I had just said, but despite that he stayed silent.

Then a few seconds later his face scrunched up.

"But...but y'know. I said before that I stood in line for ages with my friends to buy this game. They would have logged in and most likely they'd be in the plaza even now. I can't...go without them.

"..."

I let out a sigh and bit my lip.

I could understand all too well what Cline was trying to tell me through his nervous gaze.

He—was bright and was easy to get along with, and he most probably took care of other people pretty well. He was most definitely hoping that I'd take all his friends with him.

But I just couldn't nod.

If it was just Cline, I could get to the next village while protecting us from aggressive monsters. But if there was even two more—no, even one more person coming along it would be dangerous.

If somebody died along the way, they'd die as Kayaba had announced.

The responsibility would undoubtedly fall on me, who suggested to set out from the safe «Starting City» and failed to protect my comrade.

To bear such a heavy burden, I could never do that. It was just simply impossible.

Cline seemed to have read all these worries that had flashed through my mind. A smile appeared on his slightly bearded cheek and he shook his head.

"No...I can't keep relying on you. I was a guild master in the game I used to play. It'll be fine. I'll just make do with the techniques that you've taught me till now. And...there's still a chance that this was just a bad joke and that we'll all be logged off. So don't worry about us and go to the village."

"..."

With my mouth closed, I was wracked by an indecision that I'd never felt before in my life.

Then I chose the words that would gnaw at me for two years.

"...OK."

I nodded, stepped back, and said with my dry throat.

"Well, let's part here. If anything comes up, send me a message. ...well, see you later, Cline."

Cline called me as I turned my eyes downwards and turned to leave.

"Kirito!"

"..."

I sent him a questioning glance, but he didn't say anything; his cheek only shook a little.

I waved once and turned northwest—the direction of the village that I'd use as my next base.

When I had taken about five steps, a voice called out from behind me again.

"Hey, Kirito! You look pretty good in real life! You're quite my style!"

I smiled bitterly and shouted over my shoulder.

"Your look suits you ten times better too!"

Then I turned my back on the first friend that I had made in this world and ran straight forward ceaselessly.

After I had run through the winding alleyways for a few minutes, I looked back again. Of course, there was nobody there.

I ignored the odd feeling of my chest being restricted and ran.

I ran desperately to the northwest gate of the Starting City and then past the large plains and the deep forest, then a small village located past all this—then past that to an endless, lonely game of survival.

Chapter 4

One month into the game, two thousand people were dead.

The hope that outside help would come had been crushed; not even a message had gotten through.

I didn't see it myself, but they said that the panic and the madness that took hold of the players when they realized that they really couldn't get back was unbelievable. There were people crying and others wailing, and some even tried to dig up the ground of the city saying that they were going to destroy this world. Of course, all buildings were non-destructible objects, so this attempt failed without any results to show for it.

They say that it took days for the players to accept the situation and think of what to do afterward.

The players were split into four big groups.

The first consisted of a little over half of the players; they were the ones who still wouldn't accept the conditions that Kayaba Akihiko had put forth and still waited for outside help.

I understood what they were thinking painfully well. Their real bodies would be lying on a bed or sitting on a chair fast asleep. That was reality and this situation was the «fake», if there was even the smallest discovery they might be able to get out—of course, the log out button was gone but there might be something that the creators of the game might have overlooked—.

And outside, the company who ran the game, Agas, would be trying harder than anyone to save the players—if they could just wait, they might be able to open their eyes, have a teary reunion with their family and then return to school or work and this would all have been just something to talk about—.

It wasn't really unreasonable to think like this. I think I was hoping for the same thing deep inside.

Their plan of action was to «wait». They didn't take even a single step out of the city and used the money they had been allotted at the beginning of the game—the currency was called «Coll» in this world—sparingly, buying only the food they needed to get through the day and finding cheap inns to sleep in, and walked around in groups spending each day without any thought.

Thankfully the «Starting City» was a city that took up twenty percent of the first floor's surface and was large enough to fit a Tokyo district. So the five thousand players would have had sufficient room to live in.

But no help was forthcoming however long they waited. On some days, the sky outside was not a crystal blue but covered with grey clouds. Their money couldn't last forever and they realized that they would have to do something.

The second group consisted of about thirty percent, or three thousand players. It was a group where all the players in it worked together. The leader of it was the admin of the largest online game info site.

The players who had gathered under this group were split into several groups and shared all of their gains, collected information on the game and set out to explore the labyrinth area where the stairs were. The leaders of this group set the «Black Iron Castle» up as their base of operations and sent orders to their various groups.

This huge group didn't have a name for quite a while, but after all the members received a uniform, somebody gave them the, somewhat grim, name «The Army».

The third group was made of, at an estimate, a thousand players. It consisted of people who had wasted all their Coll but didn't want to make money by fighting monsters.

As a side-note, there were two basic bodily needs that existed in SAO. One was fatigue and the other was hunger.

I understood why fatigue existed. Virtual information and real information were no different to the users' brains. If players became sleepy they could go to an inn and rent a room to sleep in depending on the amount of money they had in their pockets. If one hoarded a large amount of Coll, they could buy a house, but the amount of money needed wasn't small.

Hunger was a need that many players thought of as strange. Although they didn't really want to imagine what was happening to their bodies in the real world, it was most probable that we were being force fed nutrients somehow. That meant that the emptiness we felt here had nothing to do with our real bodies.

But if we bought some virtual bread or meat in the game and ate it, the emptiness disappeared and we felt full. There was no way to find out how this strange mechanism worked, short of asking a professional in the field of neurology.

So the opposite was true too; the hunger didn't disappear unless we ate something. We most probably wouldn't die if we starved, but the fact that it's a need that's hard to ignore doesn't change. So the players visited the restaurants that the NPCs ran daily and ate some food there, at least data-wise.

Also, there was no need to excrete waste in the game. As to what was happening in the real world, I didn't even want to think about it.

Well back to the main point—

The players who had squandered all their money in the beginning, who couldn't sleep or eat, usually joined the huge organization that I mentioned a while ago, «The Army». This was because they received at least something to eat if they followed the orders from the top.

But there are always those who can never cooperate with others however hard they try. The ones who never wanted to join, or got kicked out for causing trouble, set the slums of the «Starting City» as their base and started thieving.

Inside the city, or the places mostly referred to as «Safe Areas» were protected by the system and players couldn't hurt each other. But it wasn't like that outside. The stragglers made teams with other stragglers and ambushed other players—which was in many ways much more profitable than hunting monsters—out on the fields or the labyrinth areas.

Even then, they never «murdered» anybody—well at least during the first year.

This group got slowly larger until they reached the aforementioned number of a thousand.

The final, fourth group was, simply said, the rest.

There were fifty organizations made by the people who wanted to clear the game but didn't join the huge organization. Their number was about five hundred. We called these groups «Guilds» and they had a mobility that «The Army» lacked; and using that, they steadily grew stronger.

Then there were the very few who chose the merchant and craftsman classes. They numbered only about two, three hundred, but they created guilds of their own and started training the skills that they would need to earn the Coll they need to get by.

The rest, around one hundred players, were called «Solo Players»—this was the group I belonged in.

They were the selfish group who had decided that acting alone would be better for strengthening themselves and simply surviving. If one could use the information they had, they could level up quickly. After they had gained the power to fight against monsters and bandits by themselves, there was truthfully no merit in fighting with other players.

An additional feature of SAO was that there was no «Magic»; in other words, there were no «long range attacks with a 100% accuracy rate». so one could fight large groups of monsters alone. If one had the required skills, playing solo was much more effective experience point-wise than party playing.

Of course, there were risks involved. To give an example, if a person was «Paralyzed» and if he had party members with him, they'd just cure him and that'd be that. But if the person was playing solo, it could lead straight to death. Actually, in the very beginning, solo players had the highest fatality rate amongst all the players.

But if you had the experience and knowledge to win through all this danger, there was a much better compensation for all this risk, and the beta testers, including myself, had both of these things.

With this precious information, the solo players leveled up at a fierce pace, and soon a huge gap appeared between them and the rest of the players. After the game had calmed down a bit, most solo players got out of the first floor and used the cities in the upper levels as their bases.

Inside the Black Iron Castle, where the «Room of the Resurrected» had been during the beta testing, there now stood a huge metal monument that hadn't even existed during beta testing. The names of all ten thousand players were carved on its surface. In addition, a line appeared on the name of the people who were dead, and it gave the time and reason of death next to it.

The first person to get the honor of having his name crossed out appeared three hours into the game.

The reason of death was not losing to a monster. It was suicide.

He believed in the theory that "according to the structure of the Nerve Gear, if a person is cut off from the system they'll automatically regain consciousness." He climbed over the iron fence at the north end of the city, or the edge of Aincrad and flung himself off.

Beneath the floating castle that was Aincard, no sort of ground could be seen, however much you squinted. There was only an endless sky with several layers of white clouds. As countless players watched him, the boy got steadily smaller, leaving a long scream and finally disappearing into the clouds.

The short line was crossed mercilessly over the boy's name two minutes later. The reason of death was «Falling in midair». I didn't even want to imagine what he went through during those two minutes. There was no way of knowing if he had returned to the real world or—as Kayaba had said—had had his brain fried. But, most people believed that if there was such a simple way of escaping the game, the people outside would have already pulled the plugs and saved us.

But there were still some who gave in to this easy way of dealing with things. Most people, including me, found it hard to take the «Death» in SAO in as reality.

That had still not changed. The phenomenon of the HP bar reaching zero and the polygons that consisted our bodies being destroyed was too much like the «Game Over» that we were all too familiar with. It was probable that the only way to understand the real meaning of death in SAO would be to experience it yourself. This shaky truth would have been the reason that the decrease in players slowed.

On the other hand, a lot of the players who were part of «The Army», especially the ones who had first belonged to the first group, started losing their lives while trying to clear the game and fighting monsters.

Fights in SAO needed a bit of getting used to. It was less like trying to force yourself to move but «entrusting» your movements to the system.

For example, even for a simple uppercut with a one-handed sword, if the player learned the «One-handed Sword Skill» and then equipped «Uppercut» from the list, they would only need to assume the starting motion; then the system would almost automatically move their body for them. But if someone without the skill tried to copy the movements, it would be too slow and weak to use in actual combat. It was like inputting commands in a fighting game.

The people who didn't adjust to this just swung their swords around and even lost to the boars and wolves that they would have been able to beat if they used the single strike skills that they had on as default. Even then, if they just gave up and ran away after losing some of their HP, they wouldn't have died but—

Unlike the attacks of 2D monsters that we see through a monitor screen, the battles in SAO were so real that you feel afraid. It was as if a real monster was baring its teeth at you and giving chase with the intention of killing you.

Even during the beta testing, there were some people who panicked in the middle of a fight, but now death awaited you if you lost. The panic-stricken players forgot about using their skills and even running away; their HP disappeared and they were expelled from this world forever.

Suicide, losing to monsters. The number of crossed out names multiplied at a terrifying pace.

When these reached two thousand, one month into the game, a cloud of despair hung over the surviving players. If the number of deaths kept increasing at this speed, all ten thousand would be dead in less than half a year. Clearing the hundredth floor seemed like a mere dream.

But—humans adapt.

A little over a month later, the first labyrinth was cleared and the number of deaths started to slow quickly. People started spreading information in order to survive and most people started to perceive that monsters weren't all that scary if you gained enough experience points and leveled up properly.

It might be possible to clear the game and return to the real world. The number of players that started thinking like that increased slowly but steadily.

The top floor was still far away, but the players started moving with this vague hope—and the world started turning again.

Now, two years later and with twenty six floors left, the number of survivors is around six thousand.

This is the current situation in Aincrad.

Chapter 5

After ending my fight with a formidable enemy that prowled the «Labyrinth Area» of floor seventy-four, I recounted my way back, as well as the past, and let out a sigh of relief as I saw the light of the entrance.

I emptied my head, walked quickly out of the passageway, and took a deep breath of the fresh, clean air.

In front of me, a narrow lane went into the thick, overgrown forest. Behind me, the labyrinth area I had just come out of soared high into the sky—until the bottom of the next floor to be more precise.

Because the game was based on getting to the top of the castle, the dungeons in this world weren't underground labyrinths but existed as towers. However, the basic setting hadn't changed: monsters stronger than the ones you met out on the fields roamed within, while the boss monster waited for you in its deepest reaches.

Right now, eighty percent of the seventy-fourth floor labyrinth area had been explored, or in other words, had been «mapped». In a couple of days, the boss room would most probably be discovered, and a large-scale team would be made. Then, even I, a solo player, would take part.

I smiled at myself for feeling both expectant and frustrated at the same time and started walking down the lane.

For the moment, my hometown is the biggest city in Aincrad, «Algade», which was located on the fiftieth floor. Well, in mere size, the Starting City was larger, but that place had now totally become «The Army»'s base of operations, so it was a little uncomfortable to walk around in.

As soon as I made it out of the now darkening plains, a forest full of old trees stretched out before me. If I walked for thirty minutes through there, I would arrive at the «Housing Area» of the seventy-fourth floor and just use the «Teleport Gate» there to warp myself over to Algade.

I could always use one of the instant teleportation items in my inventory to return to Algade at any time. But since it was a little expensive, I was reluctant to use it unless I was in a dangerous situation. There was still some time before the sun disappeared completely, so I resisted the temptation of returning to my house as fast as I could and entered the forest.

As a rule, the edges of each floor in Aincrad were usually open to the sky, apart from the support pillars. The trees burned red from the light that entered through that gap. The mist that flowed in between the rays of light shone brilliantly as it reflected the light of the sunset. The cries of the birds, which were common during the day, were hard to hear now, while the sound of branches swaying in the wind seemed magnified.

I knew quite well that I could fight the monsters that appeared in this area even while half-asleep, but the fear that comes with the dark was hard to suppress. A feeling, similar to the one I had as a kid when I was trying to get back home after losing my way, filled me.

But I didn't dislike this feeling. I had forgotten about this primitive fear sometime when I was living back on the other side. The feeling of loneliness that you get when you're traveling the wilderness with nobody in sight however much you look—you could call this the essence of an RPG.

While I was absorbed in these nostalgic memories, a cry that I'd never heard before suddenly entered my ears.

It sounded only for a moment, high and clear like a reed pipe. I stopped my feet and carefully searched for the direction the sound came from. If you heard or saw something that you'd never experienced before in this world, it meant that you were either very lucky or the opposite.

As a solo player, I'd trained my «Scan for Enemy» skill. This skill prevented ambushes and when you became more proficient at it, it gave the player the additional ability of being able to detect monsters that were in "hiding." Through it, I could see a monster hiding between the branches ten meters away.

It wasn't very big. It had green fur to camouflage itself in the leaves and had ears longer than its body. As I concentrated on it, it automatically became my target and a yellow cursor appeared along with its name.

I held my breath as soon as I read the name: «Ragout Rabbit». It was rare enough to earn the adjective "super."

It was the first time I'd actually seen the real thing. The plump rabbit that lived in the branches wasn't all that strong, nor did it give you that many experience points, but-

I silently drew a thin throwing pick from my belt. My «Knife Throwing Skill» wasn't all that high. I had simply chosen it as a branch on my skill tree at some point. But I'd heard that the Ragout Rabbit was the fastest monster among the ones that were currently known, so I didn't really have much confidence in catching it with my sword.

I had one chance to attack before the opponent noticed me. I raised my pick, praying mentally, and assumed the «Single Shot» position.

Well, however low my skill was, my hand was backed up by my high dexterity and threw the pick in a blur of motion. The pick glinted once and then was sucked into the trees. As soon as I attacked, the cursor, which showed the direction the Ragout Rabbit was in, turned red and the HP bar appeared beneath it.

A high pitched scream sounded from the direction which I'd thrown my pick. The HP bar faltered a little and then went down to 0. The familiar sound of polygons shattering resounded.

I made a fist with my left hand. I raised my right hand and opened the main menu. I opened the inventory quickly, with even my hand movements seeming too slow to me, and it was there at the very top of the newly acquired item list: «Ragout Rabbit's meat». It was a rare item that could be sold to other players at a minimum price of one hundred thousand Coll. That amount of money was enough to tailor a full set of the best armor and still have change leftover.

The reason that this was so expensive was pretty simple, as it was set as the most delicious food ingredient among the numerous ingredients available in the game.

Eating was just about the only pleasure in SAO, but the only thing you could eat usually was the soup and bread that tasted as if they were from the European countryside—well not that I knew; but the fact was that it was plain. A few players who had trained their cooking skill had established this after a lot of thought in order to let the other players eat a wider range of foods. But even this wasn't that easy to get across, so as a rule the players were all deprived of taste.

Of course, my current situation wasn't much different, and I didn't dislike the soup and full wheat bread the NPC restaurant that I frequented sold. But from time to time the need to eat at least a mouthful of juicy meat overtook me.

For a while I stared at the name of the item and kept wondering what to do. The chances of me getting this sort of ingredient again were very low. To be honest, I really wanted to eat it. But the higher the ingredients' rank, the more skill was needed to actually cook it. So I had to find a master level cook to cook this for me.

But I didn't know any. Well, I did know a few, but hunting them down for something like this was annoying. Even more than that, it was about time I got a new set of equipment. Consequently, I decided to sell it.

I closed the window as if to get rid of any regrets, and scanned the area with my skill. There wasn't a very high chance of a bandit appearing on the front lines, but you couldn't be too careful when you had an S-class item in your hands.

I'd be able to buy all the teleport items I wanted once I sold this, so I decided to minimize the risk involved and started rummaging through my pouch.

The thing that I'd taken out was a crystal shaped like an eight sided pillar that shone a rich blue. The few magic items in this world where «Magic» had been excluded were all shaped like gems. Blue was for instant teleportation, pink for recovering HP, green for antidotes, and so on. They were all convenient items that produced instant effects, but they were also expensive. So in most cases people used cheaper items such as slow-acting potions after running away from a fight.

Telling myself that this was, without a doubt, an emergency situation, I grasped the blue crystal and shouted.

“Teleport! Algade!”

There was the refreshing sound of many bells ringing and the crystal in my hand shattered into pieces. At the same time, my body was engulfed in blue light and the forest disappeared from my vision as if it was melting. A brighter light then flashed, and when it disappeared, the teleportation was over. In place of the sound of the rustling leaves, the sound of a smith hammering and the loud sounds of the city invaded my ears.

The place I appeared at was the «Teleport Gate» that was situated in the middle of Algade.

In the middle of the circular plaza, a gate made out of metal stood over five meters high. Inside, the air swirled as if a mirage, and people who were teleporting, or who had just teleported, came and went.

Four large roads stretched in all four directions out of the plaza, and on the sides of all these roads, countless small shops were gathered. The players who sought a short refuge after a day of exploring shared conversations in front of the food menus or pubs.

If someone tried to describe Algade in one word, it would be «messy».

There were no big streets like the ones you could see in the Starting City and crisscrossing alleyways covered the whole city. There were shops that you couldn’t even tell what they were selling, and inns that looked like you could never get back out once you went in.

Actually, there were a lot of players who’d accidentally gone into one of the alleyways of Algade and wandered for days before getting back out. I’ve been living here for almost a year now, but I still can't remember half of them. Even the NPCs here were strange people whose class was hard to guess, and it makes you think that people who use this as a hometown these days are all sort of strange.

But I liked the feel of these streets. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the only time I felt at peace was when I was sipping some strange smelling tea at a corner shop I frequented. The reason behind this was that I felt a little sentimental because it reminded me of an electronics store I used to frequent—well not really, or I hoped not.

Thinking that I’d deal with the item before going back to my house, I started walking towards a shop.

If I followed the road that led west out of the central plaza, I would arrive at the shop after working my way through the crowds for a little bit. Inside, it was so small that five players would feel cramped in there, and it had the trademark dizziness of a player shop: the tools, weapons, and even food ingredients were mixed up.

The shop owner was busily getting worked up bargaining.

There are two ways of selling items. One was selling to an NPC, a character controlled by the system. There was no danger of being tricked but the price was always the same. To stop inflation, the price was set lower than the actual market price.

The other was trading with another player. In this case, you could sell the item for a high price if you bargained well, but you had to find someone to buy it, and arguments between the players after completing the trade weren't uncommon.

Therefore, merchant players who specialized in trading items appeared.

Merchant players couldn't live on trading itself. Like the technician classes, they had to fill half of their skill slots with battle unrelated skills. But that didn't mean that they could stay off the fields. Merchants had to fight for goods and technicians for ingredients, and, of course, they had a harder time than warriors. It was hard for them to feel the exhilarating feeling of beating an enemy.

Therefore, the reason that they chose these classes would be the noble one of helping the players who fought on the front lines every day. So I respected them deeply, if secretly.

…well, I respected them, but it was also true that the character in front of me was someone who was very far from self-sacrificing.

"Okay, it's settled! Twenty-five «Dust Lizard's hides» for five hundred Coll!"

The owner of this shop I often came to, Egil, thumped his bargaining opponent, a weak looking spearman, on the back with his thick arm. Then he quickly opened the trade window and entered the amount in his trade list.

The opponent seemed to be thinking, but as soon as he viewed Egil's face, which looked frightening enough to resemble one of a seasoned warrior—in fact, Egil was a top class axe warrior as well as a merchant—he hurried to put the items in his trade list and pressed OK.

"Thank you every time! Please visit again!"

Egil thumped the spearman's back one last time and smiled brightly. The hide of the Dusk Lizard could be used to create high standard armor. I thought that five hundred was too cheap however you looked at it. But I stayed silent and watched the spearman leave. *Take this as a lesson to never give any ground when bargaining,* I muttered in my mind.

"Hey, you're going about your business shamelessly as usual."

The bald giant looked my way and smiled when I said this behind him.

"Hey, Kirito. Our shop's motto is to buy cheap and sell cheap," he said without any sign of remorse.

"Well, I'm a little suspicious about the 'sell cheap' bit but that doesn't matter. I want to sell you something too."

"You're a regular, so I can't trick you. Well, let's see…"

As he said this, Egil stretched his thick, short neck and looked in the trade window that I'd offered.

The avatars in SAO were all replicas of the player's real body which had been created through scans and calibrations. But every time I looked at Egil, I always asked myself how someone could have a body that fit him so well.

All 180 centimeters of his body were packed with muscle and fat, and the head that rested on top of it looked as if it'd fit a pro-wrestler villain. On top of that, he had set his hairstyle, one of the few things that could be customized, to be bald. The effect was at least as scary as the barbarian monsters.

Despite that, he had a charming face that looked childlike when he smiled. He looked in his late twenties but I couldn't even guess what he did in the real world. Not asking others about «The other side» was an unspoken rule in this world.

The two eyes that were below his thick eyebrows widened as soon as he saw the trade window.

"Wow, it's an S-rank rare item. «Ragout Rabbit's meat», it's the first time I've actually seen one… Kirito you're not that poor are you? Don't you have any thoughts of eating this?"

"Of course I have. It'll be hard to come across something like this a second time… But it's sort of hard to find someone who can cook something like this…"

Then someone behind me tapped my shoulder.

"Kirito-kun."

It was a feminine voice. There weren't many female players who knew my name. Well actually, in this situation there was only one. I grabbed the hand on my left shoulder and said.

"Cook acquired."

"Wh-What?"

With her hand in mine, the person stammered with a suspicious expression on her face.

The small face, which was surrounded by long straight chestnut hair that was split neatly in two, was egg-shaped, and her two sparkling hazelnut eyes were almost blinding. Her thin body was covered by a red and white knight-like combat uniform, and there was an elegant silver-white rapier sheathed in her white leather scabbard.

Her name was Asuna. She was so famous that almost everybody in SAO knew her.

There were a lot of reasons, but the first was that she was one of the very few female players, and that she was the owner of a face that lacked nothing.

It's hard to say this in this world, where everyone had their real bodies, but beautiful women were a super rare presence within it. You could most probably count the number of players that were as pretty as Asuna with your fingers.

Another reason that she's famous was because of her red and white uniform which belonged to the guild «Knights of the Blood». The members are called KoB by taking the initials from «Knights of the Blood», and, out of the many guilds, everyone acknowledged them as the best.

It's only a medium-sized guild of about thirty players, but they were all high leveled and seasoned warriors, with the leader of the guild being its strongest player and almost a legend within SAO. Also, contrary to her delicate frame, Asuna was the sub-leader. Her sword skill was so exceptional that it had earned her the title «Flash».

So her appearance and sword skill were at the zenith of six thousand players. It would have been strange for her not to have become famous. She had numerous fans, but among them there were some stalkers who virtually worship her, and there were also those who hate her, so it seems like she's having a hard time.

Well, since she is a top class warrior, there shouldn’t be that many that would challenge her directly. But as if the guild wanted to show that they would protect her, she's often trailed by two or more bodyguards. Even now, there were two men a few steps behind her fully equipped in metal armor and KoB uniforms. One of them, with his hair in a pony tail, was glaring at me, who had grabbed Asuna’s hand.

I let go of her hand, shook mine in his direction, and replied.

“What’s up, Asuna? For you to be coming to such a rubbish heap like this.”

The face of the man with the pony tail and the shop owner’s faces convulsed; one because I didn’t call Asuna with her title and the other because I called his shop a rubbish heap. But the shop owner...

“It’s been a while, Egil-san.”

...gave a sunny smile after hearing Asuna’s greeting.

Asuna looked back at me and pouted her lips in discontent.

“Hey, what’s this? After all the trouble I went through to see if you were alive for the boss fight that’s going to take place soon.”

“You’ve already listed me as a friend so you’d be able to tell if you just looked at that. Anyway the only reason you could find me was because you used a friend trace on your map.”

Asuna turned her head to the side as soon as I answered.

She was also responsible for progressing through the game in the guild as well as being a sub-leader. That job included searching out selfish solo players like me and forming a party to fight bosses. But even then, to actually come to see me, there should be a limit to how devoted a person could be.

Looking at my half-tired, half-amazed expression, Asuna put her hands on her hips before saying with a motion that was akin to raising her chin.

“Well, you’re alive and that’s all that matters. M-More than that, what do you mean? You were saying something about a chef or something.”

“Oh, right right. How high is your cooking skill right now?”

By what I knew, Asuna was particularly focused on raising her cooking skill whenever she found time in between training her sword skills. She answered my question with a proud smile.

“Listen and be surprised! I «Mastered» it last week.”

“What!?”

She’s…an idiot.

I thought that for a second. I didn’t say it out loud, of course.

Training skills was mind-numbingly boring and extremely time-consuming, and could only be «Mastered» after leveling them up 1000 times. On that note, levels didn’t have anything to do with skills and went up by gaining experience points. The things that went up with the levels were HP, strength, stats like dexterity, and the number of «Skill Slots» which decided how many skills you could learn.

Right now I had twelve slots, but the only ones that had been completed were my one-handed straight sword skill, Scan for Enemy skill, and my Weapon Guard skill. It meant that this girl had spent a lot of time and effort on a skill that wasn’t even of any help in battle.

“…well, I’ve got something to ask you to do, trusting that skill.”

I waved her over and put my window on show mode so that she could see it. Asuna looked at it suspiciously, and then her eyes widened at the name of the item.

“Uwa!! That…that’s an S-rank food ingredient!?”

“Let’s trade. If you cook this, I’ll let you have a bite.”

Even before I stopped talking, that right hand of «Flash» Asuna grabbed me by the collar. Then she pushed her face to a few centimeters before mine.

“Give. Me. Half!!”

ASUNA
KIRITO

My chest stopped at this sudden ambush and I nodded without thinking. When I got back to my senses it was too late, and she was waving her arm with excitement. Well, let's consider it a good thing that I can watch that delicate face from so close. I convinced myself.

I closed the window and spoke while looking at Egil's face.

"Sorry. I'll stop the trade."

"No. It's fine but…hey, we're friends right? Eh? Can't you give me a taste…?"

"I'll give you an eight hundred word essay on it."

"D-Don't be like that!"

As I cold-heartedly turned my back on Egil, he called out in a voice that seemed as if it was the end of the world. As I made to walk away, Asuna grabbed the sleeve of my coat.

"Cooking's good, but where are we going to do it?"

"Ah…"

If you're going to cook, then you needed some cooking appliances, such as a stove or an oven, as well as the ingredients. It wasn't as if my house didn't have them, but I couldn't invite the sub-leader of the KoB into a messy place like that.

Asuna looked at me with an unbelieving expression on her face.

"Well, your house wouldn't have the proper appliances anyway. But I could serve it to you in my house just this once."

She said something shocking in a calm voice.

Asuna ignored me, who was standing there frozen as if I was lagging while my brain processed this, and turned to her guards and spoke.

"I'm going to teleport to «Salemburg» soon, so its fine if you go. Thank you for your hard work."

"A-Asuna-sama! Coming into the slums was bad enough, but to invite someone as suspicious as him to your house. Wh-What are you thinking!?"

I couldn't believe what I just heard. «Sama» he said. He must be one of the worshipers. As I looked at Asuna with these thoughts, the person in question had an annoyed expression on her face.

"OK, maybe you could call him suspicious, but his skill is unquestionable. He's most probably ten levels above you Cradil."

"Wh-What are you saying? To say that I'm not even equal to someone like that…!"

The man's voice sounded all the way out to the alley. He glared at me with his heavily lidded eyes. Then his face scrunched up as if he suddenly recognized something.

"That's right…you, you were definitely a «Beater»!"

Beater was made by mixing «Beta tester» and «Cheater». It was a word meant for people who used unfair means and a swearword that was unique to SAO. It was something I'd heard a lot of times. But however many times I heard it, it still hurt me deeply. The face of the person who had first said it to me, who had once been a friend, suddenly appeared in my head.

"Yeah. You're right."

When I affirmed it with an expressionless face, the guy started talking excitedly.

"Asuna-sama, these sorts of guys don't care about anything as long as they're fine! There's nothing to gain from mixing with these kinds of people!"

Asuna, who had been calm until now, suddenly knotted her eyebrows in disgust. A crowd had suddenly appeared and the words «KoB» and «Asuna» could be heard here and there.

Asuna looked around and said to the man who was getting more excited by the minute.

"Well, please leave for today. That's an order."

She spoke bluntly and grabbed my belt with her left hand. Then she started walking towards the gate plaza, dragging me as she went.

"Err…hey! Is it okay to leave them like that?"

"It's fine!"

Well, I've got no reason to complain. We made our way through the crowd, leaving the two guards and Egil, who was still disappointed. When I glanced back one last time, the furious expression of the man called Cradil stuck to my vision like an afterimage.

Chapter 6

Salemburg was a beautiful castle-city on the sixty-first floor.

It isn't all that big. But the city, with a castle which has serene spires at its center, was delicately built from white granite and contrasted spectacularly with the overflowing green foliage. There were quite a few shops in the market so a lot of players wanted to use this place as their home city. But since the houses were crazily expensive—they must be at least three times the price of Algade—it's almost impossible to buy one unless you were at a high level.

When Asuna and I arrived at the teleport gate in Salemburg, the sun had almost set, and the final rays of light lit the streets a dark purple.

Most of the sixty-first floor was taken up by a lake, and Salemburg was located on an island in the middle of it, so one could see the setting sun reflected on it like a picture on a canvas.

I gazed at the city in awe, my breath taken away by its beauty as it shined blue and red with the vast lake behind it. Not that it would be that hard for the Nerve Gear to create lighting effects like this with CPUs of the new generation and their diamond semiconductors.

The teleport gate was placed in the plaza in front of the castle and the main street, which headed north going through the city and was lined by street lamps. The stores and houses stood orderly on either side of the street, and even the NPCs that were walking around looked well dressed somehow. I spread my arms and breathed deeply, as even the taste of the air differed from Algade.

"Hmmm. It's large and has few people. I like how it feels so spacious."

"Then why don't you move?"

"I don't have anywhere near enough money," I answered with a shrug before fixing my expression and asking hesitatingly.

"…more than that, is it really okay? Back there…"

"…"

As if she realized what I was trying to say, Asuna twirled around with her head bowed down and tapped the floor with the tip of her boot.

"…it's true that some bad things happened a couple of times when I was alone. But to assign bodyguards to me, it's going a bit too far, right? I said I didn't need them, but…the members said that it's guild policy."

She continued in a subdued voice.

“In the past, the guild was small with the leader inviting people individually by talking with them. But as the number of members grew and started changing… Then when it started being called the greatest guild or so, something became a bit strange.”

She stopped talking and turned around slightly. Something in her eyes seemed like she wanted to rely on me, and I subconsciously stopped breathing.

I had to say something. I thought that, but what could a selfish solo player like me say? I simply watched in silence for a few seconds.

Asuna turned her gaze first. She watched the lake, bathed in soft light, and said, as if to get rid of the awkwardness,

“Well, it’s nothing much, so you don’t have to worry! If we don’t go quickly, the sun is going to set.”

Asuna set off first, and I followed suit. We passed by quite a lot of players, but none of them stared at her.

I only stayed here for a couple of days when the front line had been here, so I never really looked around properly. As I looked at the delicate carvings that adorned the city, the thought that living in a city like this for a while wouldn’t be too bad came unbidden to my mind. But then I changed my mind and decided that it would be better if I only came here once in a while to sightsee.

The house where Asuna lived was a small but pretty three floored maisonette which you could get to by walking eastward from the downtown area for a few minutes. It was, of course, the first time that I had come here. Now that I thought about it, I’d only talked to this girl during boss fight conferences; and we’d never even been to an NPC restaurant together before. As I became conscious of this, I stopped in front of the doorway, suddenly tense, and asked.

“Is it…alright? Y’know…”

“What? It’s something I suggested first, and there wasn’t anywhere that was fit for cooking so we don’t have a choice!”

Asuna turned her head and bounced up the stairs. I steeled my resolve and followed her.

“E-Excuse me.”

I hesitantly opened the door then stood there, speechless.

I’d never seen a home so well-ordered before. The wide living/dining room and the kitchen adjacent to it had furniture made out of light-colored wood and was decorated with moss green cloth. They were all most probably the highest-quality player-made items.

But it wasn’t overly decorated either, nor did it make you feel uncomfortable. It was totally different from my house. I felt overwhelmingly relieved that I didn’t invite her to my house.

“Erm…how much did this cost…?”

At my materialistic question.

“Hmm-, with the house and the furniture, about 4000k? I’m going to change so just sit anywhere you want.”

She answered lightly and disappeared through a doorway. "K" is short for thousand. 4000k meant four million Coll. I practically lived on the front lines, so I could save up that much if I tried. But I always wasted it on either some strange item or a sword that caught my eye, so I never saved up. I chastised myself, which was out of character, and sank into the spongy sofa.

Asuna appeared after a short while, fully changed into a simple white tunic and a knee-length skirt. Well, I say changed but there’s no actual taking off and putting on involved. All you have to do is fiddle with the figure in the stats window. But there were a few seconds when the player was only dressed in their underwear. So unless they were a very bold male player, most players, especially girls, did not change in front of others. Our bodies may be nothing more than just a bunch of data rendered into 3D, but that sort of thinking got hazy after two years, and right now my eyes went to Asuna’s bare arms and legs without any remorse.

Asuna, with no clue of my inner-conflict, threw a sharp look my way and said.

“Are you planning to stay dressed like that?”

I quickly opened my menu screen and took off my leather coat and sword. While I was at it, I brought the «Ragout Rabbit’s meat» out as well and put it, which was in a clay bowl, on the table in front of me.

“So this is the legendary S-rank food ingredient-. …so, what should I make?”

“Ch-Chef’s recommendation.”

“Oh…? Well then, let’s have stew. It even has «ragout» in its name.”

Asuna headed into the next room; I followed.

The kitchen was large, and the various appliances that I could see next to the oven looked expensive. Asuna double clicked on the oven’s surface, set the time on the pop up window that appeared, and pulled out a metal pot from the cupboard. She put the raw meat in it, threw a couple of herbs in, and then poured water inside it before closing the lid.

“If I was actually cooking, I would need to make all sorts of preparations. But in SAO, it’s so short that it’s no fun.”

She put the pot in the oven and pressed the "start" button on the menu as she complained. Even as the 300 seconds counted down, she moved about with precision, making various other side dishes. I watched in a stupefied daze as she went about, not making even a single mistake in operating the menu or in the actual tasks.

In just five minutes, the table was fully set, and Asuna and I sat down across from each other. The brown stew looked incredibly delicious as it rested on the plate in front of me. Its smell enticed me as the steam rose slowly from it. Smooth, rich sauce covered the thick meat, and the creamy white marbling on it was truly enchanting.

We lifted our spoons and felt that even the time spent saying, “Thank you for the meal,” was too long. Then we ate a mouthful of the best food in existence in SAO. I tasted the heat and flavor in my mouth, and as I bit into the meat, the juices inside poured out.

Eating in SAO didn’t calculate and simulate the feeling of biting into the food. Instead it used a «Taste Reproduction Engine» that Argus and an affiliated environment programming designer had made together.

This sent preprogrammed sensations of «eating» various foods and could make the user feel as if they were actually eating something in real life. It was originally designed for people who were on diets or needed to restrict the amount of food they ate, so it sent fake signals to the parts of the brain registering heat, taste, and smell to trick it. In other words, our real bodies weren’t actually eating anything right now, and all that’s happening was that the program was wildly stimulating our brains.

But thinking of such things in this situation was just not cool. I was, without a doubt, eating the best food I’ve tasted since logging on. Asuna and I didn’t say a word and continued to go through the process of scooping up the soup with our spoons and bringing it to our mouths.

Finally, as we cleaned our dishes—in every sense of the word, as if the stew actually existed—and left the empty plate and pot in front of her, Asuna let out a big sigh.

“Ah…I did well to stay alive till now…”

I totally agreed. Feeling full with the pleasure of having completely fulfilled a basic need for the first time in a long while, I sipped the mysterious-smelling tea. Does the taste of the meat I just ate and of the tea I’m sipping actually exist in the real world? Or were they man-made by manipulating the system? I pondered these thoughts absent-mindedly.

Asuna, sitting opposite of me with a tea cup held in her two hands, broke the few minutes of silence that lingered after the end of the feast.

“It’s strange somehow… How should I put it, I feel like, I was born in this world and I’ve been living here until now or something.”

“…me too. Lately there have been some days when I didn’t think about the other world at all. It’s not just me either… There aren’t many people who are obsessed with ‘clearing’ or ‘escaping’ nowadays.”

“The pace has slackened as well. There are only about five hundred players on the front lines now. It’s not only because of the danger…everyone, has gotten used to it, to this world…”

I simply stared at Asuna’s beautiful face, with the light from the orange lamp reflecting on it.

That face, it was definitely not a human's. With smooth skin and the shiny hair, it was too beautiful to belong to a life form. But to me, the face didn't look like it was made from a bunch of polygons anymore. I could accept that it was what it was. If I returned to the real world now and saw an actual person, I'd probably feel pretty disconcerted.

Did I really think that I wanted to go back…to that world…?

I was puzzled by the sudden thought. I woke up early and gained experience points while mapping the labyrinth. Was this really because I wanted to escape from the game?

In the past, I really did. I wanted to get out as fast as I could from this death game where you had no idea when you could die. But now I've gotten used to the game-.

"But I want to go back."

Asuna said in a clear voice as if she'd seen my inner conflict. I raised my head sharply.

Asuna smiled at me for some reason and continued.

"Because, there're so many things, that I haven't done yet."

I willingly nodded to this.

"Yeah, I suppose we have to try our best. I won't be able to look at the faces of those technician classes that supported us if we don't…"

I drank a mouthful of tea, as if to get rid of the conflict inside me. The top floor was still far away. It wouldn't be too late to think about all this then.

Feeling strangely honest, I stared at Asuna while trying to pick the appropriate words to express my gratitude. Then Asuna scrunched up her face and waved her hand, saying.

"N-N, no."

"Wh-What?"

"Some male players confessed to me when they made that expression."

"Wha…"

Disappointingly, although I had mastered my battle skills, I'd never experienced that before, so I simply opened and closed my mouth without being able to rebuke it in any way.

Asuna looked at me and laughed. I must seem pretty half-witted right now.

"So there's no one that you're particularly close to?"

"What's wrong with that…? Well, it's fine, I'm a solo anyway."

“Well, since you’re playing an MMORPG, you should make some friends.”

Asuna erased her smile and asked, as if she had suddenly become a teacher or an older sister.

“Don’t you ever have any thoughts about joining a guild?”

“Eh…”

“I understand that a beta tester like you can’t get used to groups, but…”

Her expression became serious again.

“After the seventieth floor, I think more random variants are appearing in the monsters’ algorithms.”

I felt this too. Did the programmers plan for the CPU’s tactics to become harder to read, or was it the result of the program actually learning by itself? If the latter was true, it would just keep getting harder.

“If you’re solo, it’ll get harder to take care of unexpected situations. You can’t always escape. It’ll be much safer if you’re in a party.”

“I have enough safety nets. Thank you for your advice but…guilds are, just…and…”

It would have been better if I had just stopped there, but I started bragging instead.

“Party members are usually more of a burden than any help, in my case.”

“Oh, really?”

Flash, a silver streak seemed to cut the air in front of me, and by the time I registered it, Asuna’s knife was already held just in front of my nose. It’s a basic rapier skill, «Linear». Well, I say basic, but because of Asuna’s overwhelming dexterity, the speed was amazing. To tell the truth, I couldn’t even see the weapon’s trajectory.

With a forced smile, I raised my arms in a sign of defeat.

“…okay, you’re an exception.”

“Hmmph.”

She pulled the knife away with a bored expression, and then as she spun it around with her fingers, she said something unexpected.

“Then party with me. As the head of the boss party, I’ll see if you’re as strong as the rumors say. I’ve shown you that I’m good enough. Also, this week’s lucky color is black.”

“What, what are you saying!?”

I almost fell over at this absurd proclamation and searched frantically for an argument against it.

“If…if you’re going to do that, what about your guild!?”

“It's not as if we have a level quota.”

“Then, then what about your bodyguards?”

“I’m going to leave them behind.”

I raised the teacup to my mouth in a bid to buy some time but realized that it was already empty. Asuna took it from me with a smug expression on her face and refilled it with the hot liquid from the pot.

To tell the truth—it was an attractive offer. Almost any guy would want to party with someone you could call the prettiest girl in Aincrad. But because of this, I kept asking myself why such a famous person like Asuna would want to party with me.

Perhaps she pitied me because I was a lonely solo player? Something that I said almost unconsciously, as I was filled with these negative thoughts, almost became my demise.

“The front lines are dangerous.”

Asuna’s knife went up again and shined with a seemingly brighter light than before. I nodded as quickly as I could. Even with my doubts about why she chose me, who wasn't all that noticeable among the people who were trying to clear the game, I said with resolution.

“O-Okay. Then…I’ll be waiting in front of the gate of the seventy-fourth floor, tomorrow morning at nine.”

Asuna answered with a confident smile as she lowered her hand.

Not knowing how long I could stay at a woman’s house without being rude, I said goodbye as soon as we finished eating. As Asuna accompanied me to the foot of the stairs in the building, she tilted her head a little to the side and spoke.

“Well…I suppose I’ll have to thank you for today. The food was good.”

“Ah me, me too. I want to ask you for your help again…but I suppose I won’t be able to get my hands on something like that again.”

“Oh, even normal food tastes different if you’re skilled enough.”

Asuna replied before turning her head up to look at the sky. The sky had been completely covered with the darkness of nighttime. But, of course, you couldn’t see any stars. A gloomy cover of iron and stone closed it off one hundred meters up in the air. I lifted my head as well and muttered.

“…this situation, this world, is this what Kayaba Akihiko wanted to make…?”

Both of us couldn’t answer this question that was aimed half at myself.

Kayaba, who was surely watching this world while hiding somewhere, what could he be thinking? This peaceful situation that came after the bloodstained confusion of the beginning, would it have satisfied or disappointed him? There was no way I could know.

As Asuna stepped closer to me silently, I could feel a slight warmth at my arm. Was I imagining it, or was it the result of the ever faithful simulators?

November 6, 2022 was the day this death game started, and now it was nearing the end of October 2024. Even today, after almost two years, not a single message had come through from the other side, let alone any signs of help. All we could do was live and walk, step by step, towards the top.

Another day passed on Aincrad as I thought this. Where were we going, or what was waiting for us at the end, they're all just a huge bunch of stuff that we didn’t know yet. The road ahead is long, and the light is faint. But—there are some good things too.

As I looked at the huge iron cover, I let my imagination take flight towards the unknown world that I have yet to see.

Chapter 7

9 A.M.

Today's weather setting was slightly cloudy, and the morning mist that covered the city still hadn't cleared. The light that shone from outside was reflected off it, coloring the surroundings lemon-yellow.

According to the Aincrad calendar, it was the «Month of the Ash Tree», which meant that we were getting further into fall. The temperature was slightly cold, making this the most refreshing month of the year. But right now, I felt a little under the weather.

I was waiting for Asuna at the gate plaza in the living area of the seventy-fourth floor. I couldn't sleep last night for some reason, and all I did in my simple bed in Algade was toss about in one way or another. I think I managed to fall asleep a little past three in the morning. There were plenty of features in SAO that helped the player, but sadly a button that could make you fall asleep wasn't one of them.

Oddly enough, the opposite did exist. In the time-related options of the menu, there was something called «Alarm Clock» which forced the player to wake up from their sleep. Of course, the choice of going back to sleep again or not was entirely up to you, but I succeeded in gathering enough will-power to crawl out of my bed when the system woke me up at ten to nine.

Perhaps to the blessing of the lazier players, there was no need to wash or change in the game—although some of the stranger players seem to bathe on a daily basis. But since replicating a completely liquid environment was hard even for the Nerve Gear, it couldn't reproduce a real bath perfectly. After waking up a little too close to the meeting time, I put on all my equipment in twenty seconds and walked out of Algade's teleport gate with a slight sway out to where I, slightly annoyed by the lack of sleep, waited for her, but-

"She's late…"

The time was already ten past nine. Diligent gamers were appearing from the gate and walking towards the Labyrinth area one after another.

With nothing much to do, I looked at the labyrinth map and the completion rates of my skills, stats that I already knew mostly by heart.

Ahh, I wish I had a portable game console or something.

I was rendered speechless by that sudden thought. To want to play a game within a game, I was getting worse.

Should I just go back and sleep... I even started thinking. Another blue teleport effect appeared inside the gate for the god knows how many time. I watched without much expectation. But then-

"Kyaaaaa! Please get out of the way-!"

“Ahhhhhh!?”

Usually players who teleported appeared on the ground, but this person appeared a meter off it and—flew through the air and headed straight for me.

“Huh, huh…!?”

Without any time to catch or dodge, we collided and fell to the ground in a single heap. I hit the back of my head on the stone ground, hard. If I wasn’t inside of a settlement, a couple of dots from my HP would have been taken away.

This meant—that this idiot player had jumped into the gate from the other side and appeared like that here, most likely. The thought flashed calmly though my mind. Still a bit dizzy, I raised my arm and grabbed the idiot on top of me in an attempt to push the person off.

“…hmm?”

The feeling of something strange and full registered in my hand. I squeezed it twice, and three times to figure out what the springy and rich feeling in my hand was.

“K-Kya-!!”

Suddenly, a loud scream sounded in my ear and my head hit the ground again. At the same time, the weight lifted from my body.

In front of me, there was a female player that was sitting on the ground, wearing a red on white knight uniform and a knee-length miniskirt, with a silver-white rapier in her scabbard. And for some reason, she was glaring at me with an inexplicable anger evident in her eyes. Her face was experiencing the highest degree of the emotion effect and was red all the way to her ears, and her two arms were crossed protectively against her chest-…chest…?

I was immediately able to guess what I had been grabbing with my right hand. At the same time I realized, a little too late, the dangerous situation that I was in. All the ways to avoid dangerous situations that I had trained into my head had all but vanished. While opening and closing my right hand, not knowing what to do with it, I opened my mouth.

“H-Hey. Good morning, Asuna.”

The anger in her eyes seemed to flare brighter. Those were definitely the eyes of someone who was contemplating about drawing their weapon.

I started inspecting the need for the «escape» option that had flashed to mind when the gate shined blue again. Asuna looked back with a surprised expression and got up quickly before hiding behind me.

“Eh…?”

Without knowing why, I stood up as well. The gate shined brighter when a newcomer appeared in the middle of it. This time, the player had both feet on the ground.

As the light faded, I recognized the person inside, and the impressive white cape with a red symbol on it. The man, who wore a KoB uniform and carried a sword that seemed to be a little overly decorated, was the long haired bodyguard who had been following Asuna around yesterday. His name was Cradil or something.

Cradil's frown grew deeper as he saw Asuna behind me. He didn't look all that old. He would only be around his early twenties, but the wrinkles on his face made him look older. He gritted his teeth so hard that we could almost hear it and then spoke with a barely concealed anger.

"A…Asuna-sama, you shouldn't be acting on your own like this…!"

As I heard the voice that bordered on hysterical, I thought *This is going to get complicated* and pulled in my shoulders. With his heavily lidded eyes glowering, Cradil spoke again.

"Now, Asuna-sama, let's return to HQ."

"No. I'm not even on duty today! …and Cradil, why were you standing in front of my house so early in the morning?"

Asuna replied angrily behind me.

"Fufu, I knew that such a situation would occur, so I started going to Salemburg to watch your house starting a month ago."

I could only be surprised at Cradil's proud answer. Asuna froze too. After a long silence, she asked with a forced voice.

"That…that's not part of the leader's orders is it…?"

"My duty is to escort you, Asuna-sama. Watching your house is included in…"

"What do you mean included, idiot!"

Cradil walked over with his expression becoming even more angry and annoyed, then pushed me out of the way and grabbed Asuna's hand.

"You don't seem to understand. Please don't be like this… now let's go back to HQ."

Asuna appeared to have been frightened by the voice that seemed to hide something barely concealed behind it. She threw an imploring look my way.

To tell the truth, I was wondering whether to run away like I always did until that point. But the moment I saw Asuna's eyes, my hand started moving by itself. I grabbed Cradil's right arm, the one that was grabbing Asuna, and increased the strength in my hand until just before the crime prevention code would be invoked.

"Sorry, but I'm borrowing your sub-captain for today."

The line sounded stupid even to my ears, but I couldn't back down now. Cradil, who had been purposefully ignoring me until now, scrunched his face up and pulled his hand away.

"You…!"

He screamed in a voice that seemed to rasp. Even if the system overstated expressions, there was still something that seemed strange behind his voice.

"I'll guarantee Asuna's safety. It's not like we're going to fight a boss today. You can return to HQ by yourself."

"D…Don't kid with me!! Do you think a pathetic player like you can protect Asuna-sama!!"

"Better than you can, most probably."

"Y-You insolent fool…! I-If you can talk big, I suppose you're prepared to back it up…?"

Cradil, his face now white, called the menu screen with his right hand and manipulated it quickly. Soon a semi-transparent system message appeared in front of me. I could guess what it is before I even read it.

[A 1-on-1 duel has been requested by Cradil. Do you accept?]

Below the expressionlessly shining letters were the Yes/No buttons and a number of other options. I glanced sideways at Asuna. She couldn't see the message but seemed to have guessed what was going on. I thought that she would try and stop me, but surprisingly she nodded slightly with a rigid expression.

"…is it okay? Won't this pose a problem in the guild…?"

Asuna answered to my whispered question with one of her own.

"It's fine. I'll report this to the leader myself."

I nodded in reply, then pressed Yes and chose the «First Strike Mode» from the options.

This was a duel that could be won either by landing the first clean hit or by reducing the opponent's HP to half. The message changed to [You have accepted the 1-on-1 duel with Cradil], and a countdown of 60 seconds appeared below it. The moment that number reached zero, the HP protection system that was in effect within the town would be momentarily withdrawn, and he and I would be able to cross swords until one of us won.

Cradil seemed to have made his own interpretation of Asuna's consent.

"Please watch, Asuna-sama! I will prove that there is no one better than I to escort you!"

He shouted with an expression that barely concealed his delight, drawing his huge two-handed sword from his waist, and positioning himself with a clanking sound.

I made sure that Asuna had moved further away before I drew my one-handed sword from my back. As one would expect from a member of a famous guild, his sword looked much better than mine. It wasn't just the size difference between a one-handed and a two-handed sword, but that while my sword was a simple and practical weapon, his had been fully decorated by a top class craftsman.

As we stood about five meters apart, waiting for the countdown to finish, people started crowding around us. It wasn't all that strange. This was a gate plaza in the middle of a town, and both of us were pretty well-known players.

"Solo Kirito and a KoB member are having a duel!"

As someone shouted that, cheers sounded from here and there. Since duels were usually for comparing your skills with a friend, all of the spectators cheered and whistled, ignorant to the situation that had led up to this.

But as the timer counted down, all of this started to fade away. I felt a cold thread pass through my body like when I was fighting a monster. I focused in order to read the atmosphere around Cradil, who was looking about here and there with glances of annoyance, and examined his stance and the way his feet moved.

Humans were far more liable to show certain habits when they were about to use a skill. Whether it was a charging or defending skill, or if it would start low from the ground or from high up, if their body revealed this kind of information, then it became a critical weakness.

Cradil's sword was leaning a bit back from the middle of his body and his lower body was bent down. It was clearly a sign that he was going to use a high aiming charge-type attack. Of course, it could have been a feint. I myself was actually posing with my sword in a low and relaxed posture, giving the impression that my first attack was going to be a weak blow to his lower body. You could only rely on your experience and "feel" when searching for feints.

As the countdown went down to single digits, I closed the window. I couldn't even hear the noise around me anymore.

I saw Cradil, who had been rapidly switching his gaze from me to the window and then back, went still while the muscles of his body tensed. The word [DUEL!!] appeared in the space between us, and I jumped. Sparks flew from the sole of my boot, and the air whistled by as my shoulder cut through it.

Not even a moment had passed before Cradil's body began to move as well. But there was an expression of surprise on his face, since I had shattered his expectations of a low, defend-type attack skill and charged.

Cradil's first attack was, as I had guessed, a high hitting two-handed sword charge skill: «Avalanche». If the guard was too weak, the defender might be able to block the blow but wouldn't be able to counterattack straight away due to the impact; meanwhile, the player who used it would be able to buy time to ready his stance again, since the charge widened the distance between them. It was a very good high level skill. Well, at least against monsters.

I, who had already read what Cradil was going to do, chose the charge-type skill «Sonic Leap». If we both kept charging, our skills would collide.

If we were to look at only the strength of the skill, his was stronger, and the game would favor the heavier skill if two attacks collided. In this case my sword would be deflected, and his skill would hit me, weakened but still enough to end the duel. But I wasn't after Cradil himself.

The space between us narrowed quickly. But my perception had been quickened as well, and it felt like time had slowed down. I wasn't sure if this was a result of the system, or if it was an ability that humans naturally had. All I knew was that I could see all of his movements.

The sword, which was leaning backwards, started giving off an orange light and sped towards me. His stats must have been pretty high, as one would expect from the best guild, since the time it took for the skill to start was shorter than I expected. The brightly shining blade rushed in. If I hit that skill straight on, there was no doubt that I'd receive enough damage to end the duel. Cradil's face showed his ecstasy at his apparent victory. But-

My sword, with its head-start, moved a little quicker, drawing a slanted green trajectory and hitting his sword just before it ended its attack. The game calculated the damage dealt by my sword, producing a huge spark.

Another result of two weapons colliding was «Weapon Break». It only had a chance of happening when a weapon received a heavy blow to a weak part of its structure.

But I was certain that it would break. Weapons with too much decoration had low durability.

As expected—with an ear-wrenching sound—Cradil's two-handed blade broke. There was an effect like an explosion.

We passed by each other in mid-air and landed at where the other had jumped. The broken half of his sword spun in mid-air, reflecting the sunlight, before it dug itself into the stone ground between us. After that, both the broken half and the half remaining in Cradil's hands shattered into countless polygon fragments.

Silence overtook the plaza for a while. All of the spectators were frozen with their mouths wide open. But after I landed, stood up, and habitually swung my sword from left to right, they started cheering.

"Awesome!"

"Was he actually aiming for that!?"

As I heard everyone starting to critique the short fight, I sighed. Even if it was a single skill, revealing even one card from my hand wasn't something to be happy about.

With the sword in my hand, I started walking over to where Cradil was sitting with his back turned. That back, covered by the white cape, was shaking violently. After loudly sheathing my sword on purpose, I said in a small voice.

"If you want to come again with a new weapon, I'll fight you again…but this is enough right?"

Cradil didn't even try to look at me. He shook with both hands on the ground as if he was sick. But soon, he said with an almost creaky voice, "I resign." He could have just said <I give up> or <I lose> in Japanese.

Immediately afterwards, a row of purple lines appeared exactly where it had first shown when the fight started, this time proclaiming the end of the duel and the victor. Another cheer resounded, and then Cradil stood up shakily and shouted at the spectators.

"What're you looking at!? Get lost!"

Then he turned slowly towards me.

"You… I'm going to kill you… I'll definitely kill you…"

I couldn't deny that I was a little freaked out by those eyes.

Emotions in SAO felt a little overstated, but even with that, the hate that burned in Cradil's heavily lidded eyes were scarier than any monster's.

Somebody slid to my side as I stood there in surprise.

"Cradil, I order you as the sub-leader of the Knights of the Blood. I relieve you from the position of bodyguard. Go back to HQ and stay there until there are further orders."

Asuna's words and expression were both cold. But I felt the distress behind them and unconsciously put my hand on her shoulder. Asuna leaned her stiffly tensed body a bit.

"…wh…what…this…"

This sound barely reached our ears. The rest, most probably a string of swearing, were lost in his mouth. Cradil glared at us. There was no doubt that he was thinking about attacking us with his reserve weapon, even though he knew that the crime prevention code would stop him.

But he just barely managed to restrain himself and took out a teleport crystal from inside his coat. He raised it, gripping it so hard that I thought it was going to break, and he muttered "Teleport…Grandum." He was glaring at us with hate even as his body disappeared in a flurry of blue light.

As the light disappeared, a bitter silence spread across the plaza. The spectators seemed stunned by Cradil's rage but soon left in their small groups. Asuna and I were eventually the only ones left.

What should I say? That thought went round and round in my head, but since I'd been living by myself for two years, nothing useful came to mind. I didn't even feel like making sure if I did the right thing.

Then finally, Asuna stepped away and started speaking with a fragile voice.

"…sorry. I got you mixed up in this."

"No…I'm fine, but will you be okay?"

Shaking her head slowly, the sub-leader of the greatest guild gave a spirited but weak smile.

"Yeah, I think that I'm to blame as well for enforcing the rules on everyone so harshly in order to clear the game quicker…"

"I think…that you can't do anything about that. If they didn't have somebody like you, the pace would be much slower. Well, that's not really something a lazy solo like me should be saying…ah, I didn't mean that."

I didn't even know what I was trying to say anymore, so I started saying anything that came off the top of my head.

"…so, nobody would be able to say anything about, you…taking a breather with somebody as thoughtless as me."

To this Asuna blinked a few times with a confused expression, then she smiled somewhat bitterly and softened her face.

"…well, I'll say thanks. Then I'll enjoy today as much as I can. I'll entrust you with the position of forward."

She turned energetically and started walking down the road that led out of the town.

"What? Hey! Forward is supposed to be taken in turns!"

Even as I complained, I let out a sigh of relief and followed the softly waving chestnut-brown hair.

Chapter 8

The air surrounding the path through the forest was warm. It was almost as if the dark feeling that had been present here last night was just an illusion. The morning sun shined through the branches, making golden pillars of light which butterflies fluttered through. Sadly, these were only visual effects, so you couldn't catch one even if you chased it down.

As she crunched through the soft undergrowth, Asuna said teasingly.

“You always wear the same things.”

Ah.

I looked down at my body: a slack black leather jacket, a pair of pants, and a shirt of the same color. I had virtually no metal armor equipped.

“Well, so what? If you have enough money to spend on clothes, it’s better to buy something to eat…”

“Is there a practical reason that you’re wearing all black? Or is it just character expression?”

“W-Well, what about you? You’re always wearing that white and red thing…”

As I spoke, I started scanning the area by force of habit without even thinking about it. There weren't any monsters around. But-

“I can’t help it. This is the guild unifo…huh? Why?”

“Wait a bit…”

I raised my right hand slightly and cut Asuna off. There was a player at the edge of my scan area. As I focused on the area behind me, numerous green cursors started flashing, showing that there were a lot of players there.

There’s no chance that they were a group of bandits. Bandits always hunted for players that were weaker than them, so they were rarely seen around the front lines, where all the strongest players were. More importantly, whenever a player commited a crime, their cursor would turn orange and wouldn't turn back to green for a long time. What I was worried about was their numbers.

I called the map from the main menu and put it on show mode so that Asuna could see it. The map of the area was enhanced by my scan and showed the green cursors. There were twelve of them.

“That’s a lot…”

I nodded at what Asuna said. Usually when there were too many members in a party, it became harder to fight as a group, so five or six was the typical number.

“Look at that size.”

The crowd of lights that were fast approaching in this direction marched in neat lines of two. Maybe this would happen in a dangerous dungeon, but it was rare to see such a large uniform group on the field.

If we could see the level of the members, we might have been able to guess what they were doing, but players couldn't even see the names of other players that they’d met for the first time. It was a default system that was put in place to prevent players from PKing—player killing—too freely, but it also left us with no choice but to simply guess at their level by appraising their equipment.

I closed the map and glanced at Asuna.

“We’ll have to take a look at them. Let’s hide behind the trees until they pass by.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Asuna nodded with a tense expression. We climbed up a small mount and crouched behind a shrub that came up to about our heights. It was a good position to observe the group as they passed by.

“Ah…”

Asuna suddenly looked at her clothes. The red and white uniform was pretty noticeable against the green plants.

“What should I do? I don’t have any other equipment…”

The dots were pretty close now. They were getting within seeing distance.

“Excuse me for a bit.”

I opened my coat and covered Asuna with it as well. Asuna glared at me for a bit but allowed me to cover her. The coat wasn't all that good to look at, but it gave a big hiding bonus. With all this, it would be pretty hard to notice us without a high scanning skill.

“Well, it’s not that good to look at, but it’s pretty useful right?”

“I don’t know! …shh, they’re here!”

Asuna whispered and brought a finger up to her lips. I crouched lower, and the sounds of footsteps reached my ears.

Eventually, we could see the group come up the lane.

They were all warriors. All of them wearing the same black metal armor and green battle garb. Their equipment was all of practical designs, except for a noticeable picture of a castle on each of their shields.

The front six had one-handed swords, and the back six had halberds. They all had their visors down so we couldn’t see their expressions. As we watched the twelve players march in perfect order, I even started thinking that they were a group of NPCs.

I was sure now. They were members of the huge group that had made the city on the first floor their HQ: «The Army». I could feel Asuna hold her breath.

They weren't enemies to normal players. In fact, they could be considered the group that put in the most effort to stop crimes on the field.

But their methods were a little rough, and they were said to attack orange players—who were called that because of the color of their cursors—as soon as they found them and without asking any questions. Then they'd strip the orange players of their equipment and encage them in the dungeons of the Black Iron Castle. The rumors about how «The Army» treated people who didn’t surrender yet failed to escape were pretty scary.

They were also known for traveling in huge parties and taking control of entire hunting ranges, so it was common knowledge among the players that they "should never go near «The Army»." Well, they usually operated on the fiftieth floor and below, working on strengthening their group and maintaining order, so it was rare to see them on the front lines-

As we watched silently, the twelve heavily armed warriors disappeared into the forest amongst the clanking sounds of their armor and their boots.

Seeing as all the players had gotten their hands on the software, you could say that everyone trapped inside SAO were all game maniacs, whom were a race that had no connection to the word «Rules» whatsoever. The fact they still showed such orderly movement was amazing. They might even be the strongest unit within «The Army».

After making sure that they had gone out of range on the map, Asuna and I let out a sigh of relief.

"…the rumor, it's true…"

I whispered to Asuna with my coat still over her.

"Rumor?"

"Yeah. I heard at the guild meeting that «The Army» was changing how they worked and have started appearing on the higher floors. They were once a group that was trying to clear the game, right? But after the damage they received while fighting the boss on the twenty-fifth floor, they began focusing on strengthening their group and stopped fighting on the front lines. –So, rather than going into the labyrinth in enormous numbers like they used to and causing a huge stir, they've decided to send smaller, more elite units in and try to show that they're still endeavoring to clear the game. The report guessed that the first unit would appear soon."

"So they're advertising their skill. But are they really okay just charging into an unexplored area…? They looked like they have pretty high levels but…"

"Maybe…they're going to try to beat the boss…"

Within every labyrinth, there was a boss that guarded the stairs to the next floor. They didn't regenerate and they were really strong, but the reputation and popularity gained for beating them would be huge. It would be very effective as an advertisement.

"So they gathered those people…? But that's still stupid. Nobody has even seen the boss of the seventy-fourth floor yet. Usually, people keep sending in reconnaissance groups to analyze the boss' strength and fighting patterns."

"Well, even guilds work together to beat bosses. Maybe they're doing the same…?"

"I don't know… Well, they should know as well that going up against a boss like this is meaningless. We should hurry. I hope that we won't cross paths with them in there."

I got up and was a little disappointed that I had to let Asuna go. Asuna shivered as she got out.

"It's almost winter now… I should buy a coat too. Which shop did you buy that from?"

"Hmm…it was most probably a player shop in the western area of Algade."

"Then take me there when we're done exploring."

With that said, Asuna jumped down lightly onto the lane. I followed. Because of the system, this height wasn't a problem for me.

The sun was almost at its highest point. Asuna and I made our way down the lane quickly while paying attention to our surroundings.

Luckily, we got out of the forest without meeting even a single monster, and a meadow full of blue flowers appeared before us. The lane went straight through the meadow, and at its end the Labyrinth Area stood proudly.

At the highest part of this tower, there would be a huge room and a boss would be guarding the stairs to the next floor—the seventy-fifth floor in this case. If the boss was defeated and someone arrived at the living area of the next floor and activated the teleport gate, then this floor would be cleared.

The «City Opening» would be celebrated by a huge crowd of people from the lower floors that came to see the new city, and the whole place would become alive as if there was a festival. Right now, it had been nine days since people had begun actively exploring the seventy-fourth floor. It was about time that somebody discovered the boss.

The tower was a cylindrical building made out of reddish-brown limestone. It was a place that both Asuna and I had been in numerous times, but you couldn't help feeling intimidated by its immense size. Yet that size was only one-hundredth of Aincrad. It was a hopeless wish, but, secretly, I wanted to see the colossal floating castle from outside.

We couldn’t see the unit from «The Army». They’d most likely already made it in. We walked towards the entrance, quickening our pace unconsciously.

Chapter 9

More than a year had already passed since the Knights of the Blood took the position of the best guild.

Since that time, the leader of the guild, the «Man of Legend», and the sub-leader Asuna the «Flash» both became renowned as two of the best warriors in Aincrad. Now I had a chance to watch Asuna, who had finished training the skills needed as a rapier-sword fencer, fight against a normal monster.

We were currently in the middle of a fight, and the enemy was a skeletal swordsman named «Demonic Servant». It was over two meters tall, surrounded by an eerie blue light, and held a huge straight sword in its right hand with a round metal shield in its left. Of course, it didn't have even a single muscle, yet, despite that, its strength stat was very high, which made it a hard monster to fight.

But Asuna didn't give any ground against it.

"Hrrrrgrrrr!"

With this strange cry, the skeleton swung its sword several times leaving a blue line of light in its wake. It was a four-hit combo skill: «Vertical Square». As I watched anxiously from a few steps back, Asuna stepped left and right, elegantly dodging all the blows.

Even if it was a 2-on-1 situation, we couldn't both fight at once when confronted by a fully armed enemy. It wasn't forbidden by the system, but when two people were too close together in a fight where swords swung to and fro at speeds faster than the eye could follow, it became more of a hindrance than a help. So when partying, a skill that required high levels of teamwork called «switching» was used.

After its full swing, the last blow of the four hits missed, and the Demonic Servant's posture fell slightly off-balance. Asuna didn't miss this chance and went straight into a counter-attack.

The jabs of the silver-white sword landed one after another, all spectacularly hitting their mark, and the skeleton's HP decreased. Each individual blow didn't deliver much damage, but the number of hits was overwhelming.

After getting hit by three short thrusts, the skeleton's guard went slightly up, and Asuna switched her style to slash twice at its legs. Then, with her blade tip shining blindingly white, she sent two strong jabs high and low.

It was an eight hit combo. It was most probably the high-level sword skill named «Star Splash». Striking the skeleton accurately with that thin blade, which was usually ineffective against such enemies, was a show of unbelievable skill.

The strength that had reduced about thirty percent of the skeleton's HP was also amazing, but I was lost within the elegance of the actual player. This must be what they mean by sword dancing.

Asuna shouted at me, who was standing there dumbly, as if she had eyes on the back of her head.

“Kirito-kun, switch!”

“Ah, kay!”

I rushed to raise my sword, and at the same time, Asuna performed a strong stab.

The skeleton deflected the blow with the shield held by its left hand and bright sparks came flying off. But that was an already expected outcome. The enemy was left stunned for a moment after guarding against the strong attack, unable to immediately counter.

Of course, Asuna was stunned as well after having her attack blocked, but the «gap» was what was important.

I immediately rushed in with a charge-type skill. Making a break point on purpose in the middle of a fight and trading places with a teammate was what was called «switching».

After making sure with the corner of my eye that Asuna had gotten out of range, I charged fiercely at the enemy. Unless you were a master like her, normal slashing attacks were most effective against opponents with far more «gaps» than this Demonic Servant. In this scenario, the most effective would be impact-type weapons like maces. But I, and most probably Asuna, didn’t have any impact-type skills.

The «Vertical Square» that I used to hit the enemy all four times reduced a lot of its HP. The skeleton reacted slowly. This was because the monsters’ AIs have a tendency to delay a moment before responding when the attacker’s pattern suddenly changes. Yesterday, I had to invest a lot of time and effort to make this happen with the Lizardman, but when you’ve got a teammate, one switch was all you needed. This was the biggest advantage of fighting in a party.

I parried the counterattack and started a major skill to end the battle. I delivered a strong, downward strike to the right, then twisted my wrist and swung back up again, retracing the trajectory I went down in with a motion similar to that of a golf swing. Every time the sword hit the enemy’s body, which was made completely out of bones, there was the sound of it impacting and a flow of orange light came out.

The skeleton raised its shield to block the blow that it thought was going to come from above, but I went against its expectations and rammed it with my left shoulder. Then I sent a vertical swing at the swaying skeleton, and without pause I rammed it again, with my right shoulder this time. It was a skill that overcame the problem of chaining strong attacks together by combining them with tackles: «Meteor Break». Not meaning to brag, but it was a skill that required unarmed-fighting skills as well as one-hand sword skills.

The enemy’s HP took a big hit from all the attacks and was now in the red area. I put all the strength in my body behind the final horizontal left slash of the seven hit combo. The sword flew straight at the skeleton’s neck, drawing a shining arc. The bone broke with a snapping

sound and as the skull flew up into the air, the body fell to the ground like a puppet that had all its strings cut.

“We won!!”

Asuna slapped my back, where my sword was now.

We pushed the item distribution aside and started walking again.

Until now, we had fought with monsters four times but made it through with almost no damage dealt to us. Since Asuna’s style involved throwing short jabs while my style was to chain large skills, it strained the monster’s AI—in the sense of algorithms, not the actual CPU’s processing abilities—and allowed our skills to match well. There probably is not much of a difference in our levels either.

We walked carefully through the magnificent hallway that was lined with pillars. There was no chance of being ambushed with my scan skill, but the echoing of our footsteps kept bothering me. There weren’t any sources of light in the labyrinth, but the surroundings gave off a faint, mysterious glow, so we could see pretty well.

I carefully inspected the hallway, which was reflecting a soft blue light.

The floor below was a labyrinth made out of reddish-brown limestone. But when we got up, the surroundings were made out of some stone that gave off an almost sticky blue light. The pillars were engraved with impressive but eerie pictures, and a shallow waterway ran by our feet, covering the floor. You could say that the overall atmosphere had gotten «heavier». There weren’t many empty spaces left on the map now. If my guess was right, then the area ahead was most probably-

At the end of the hallway, a pair of grey-blue doors stood waiting for us. The carvings on the door were similar to the ones on the pillars. Even if everything was just a world made solely out of data, an inexplicable aura seeped out of those doors.

“…is that…?”

“Most likely…? It’s the boss room.”

Asuna held the sleeve of my coat tight.

“What should we do…? Just looking should be fine, right?”

In contrast to these bold words, her voice sounded uneasy. Even if she was a top class swordswoman, it seemed that she still found these sorts of things scary. Well, it’s to be expected really. I was scared as well.

“…well, let’s prepare a teleportation item just in case.”

“Yeah.”

Asuna nodded and took out a blue crystal from her pocket. I prepared my item too.

“Ready…? I’m going to open it…”

With my right arm tightly gripped by Asuna, I touched the iron door with my left hand which held the crystal. If this was the real world, my palms would be flooding with sweat right now.

As I slowly put more strength into my hand, the door, which seemed to be at least twice my height, opened with surprising ease. Once it started moving, the two doors opened so quickly that we became a little bewildered. As Asuna and I stood there holding our breaths, the huge doors finished moving with a final crash and revealed to us what was inside.

-Or so we thought; it was totally dark inside. The light that was filling the hallway we were in didn’t seem to reach the end of the room. The thick cold darkness didn’t reveal anything no matter how much we stared.

“…”

As soon as I opened my mouth, two white-blue fires whooshed to life a little further in, then another pair and another pair.

Whooooooosh… With this continuous sound, a path leading to the center of the room was completed in the blink of an eye. At its end, a bigger pillar of fire blazed upwards, and the rectangular room was filled with blue light. It was quite spacious. It seemed that all of the blank space on the map had been this one room.

Asuna hung onto my right arm as if to keep her nervousness at bay, but I didn’t have enough room in my head to enjoy that feeling. This was because, just behind the pillar of fire, a huge shape had begun to appear.

The enormous body was covered with bulging muscles. Its skin was dark blue, and the head resting above its thick chest plates was not a man's, but a mountain goat's.

Two curved horns towered on either side of its head. Its eyes, also burning bright blue, were locked on us. Its lower body was covered in navy-blue fur and couldn't be seen very clearly behind the fire, but it seemed that it was also that of an animal. To put it simply, it was a demon in every sense of the word.

There was a fair distance from the entrance to the middle of the room where it stood. Despite that, we stood frozen in place, unable to move even a muscle. Out of all the monsters we had fought against up until now, this was the first demon-shaped one. It was something that I had gotten used to thanks to the countless RPGs that I had played. But now that I actually saw it, I couldn't hold the fear that rushed up from inside my body.

I hesitantly focused my gaze and read the words that had appeared: «The Gleameyes». It was undoubtedly the boss of this floor. The "The" in front of its name was proof of this. Gleameyes—eyes that gleamed.

When I read this far, the blue demon suddenly started shaking its long snout and began screaming. The blue fires shook violently and vibrations went through the floor of the room. Fiery breaths erupted from its nose and mouth as it raised its sword. Then the blue demon started charging straight for us at an unbelievable speed—causing the ground to shake—without giving us time to even think.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

As we started screaming at the same time, we turned a full one hundred eighty degrees and ran as fast as we could. We knew that in theory, the boss couldn't come out of its room, but we just couldn't stay there. Entrusting our bodies to the dexterity stats that we'd trained up until now, we ran like a gust of wind down the hallway.

Chapter 10

Without even resting to take a breath, Asuna and I ran to the safe zone that was set up somewhere in the middle of the Labyrinth Area. I had the feeling that we'd been targeted by monsters several times along the way. But to tell the truth, we weren't in the right state of mind to fight them.

We burst into the large room that had been designated as the safe area and slid to the floor with our backs side-by-side, leaning against the wall. After releasing a huge breath, we looked at each other's face and…

"…ha."

Both of us started laughing at the same time. If we had checked the map, we would have known straight away that the boss hadn't come out of its room. But we hadn`t thought of stopping to check.

"Ahahaha, ah—we ran away really fast!"

Asuna laughed in an exhilarated tone.

"It's been a long time since I've run like that, as if my life depended on it. Well, you were even more exaggerated than me!"

"…"

I couldn't contradict that. Asuna kept laughing at my sullen face. It took her a lot of effort to stop; and then she said,

"…that, looked pretty hard."

Asuna said, her face becoming serious.

"Yeah. It looked like it had only a great-sword as its weapon, but it should have special attacks as well."

"We'll have to gather a lot of forwards with high defense and keep switching."

"We'll need about ten people with shields… Well, for the moment we should just keep jabbing at it and work out how it fights."

"A…shield."

Asuna looked my way thoughtfully.

"Wh-What's the matter?"

"You're hiding something."

“What do you mean all of a sudden…?”

“But it’s weird. The biggest advantage of using one-handed swords is being able to hold a shield with the other hand. But I’ve never seen you with one. I don’t, because it would slow my attack speed, and some people don’t because they’re more worried about style. But you’re neither of those… It’s suspicious.”

She was spot on. I had a hidden skill. But I’d never used it even once in front of other people.

It wasn’t only because skills were an important way to survive, but also because I thought it would make me stand out even more if it had become known.

But, if it was her—even if she found out, it should be okay…

I opened my mouth thinking this.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Digging around about other’s skills is rude anyhow.”

She just laughed it off. Now that I had lost my chance, I simply mumbled a few words in my mouth. Then, Asuna’s eyes grew wide after checking the time.

“Ah, it’s already three. It’s late, but let’s eat lunch.”

“What!?”

I couldn’t hide my excitement.

“I-Is it handmade!?”

Asuna smiled wordlessly and quickly manipulated her menu. After getting rid of her glove, she called forth a small basket. So there was definitely one good thing about partying with her—as I thought this rudely, Asuna suddenly glared at me.

“…what bad ideas were you thinking just now?”

“N-Nothing. More than that, let’s eat.”

Asuna pouted, but nevertheless took two paper packages out of the basket and then handed one over to me. I opened the package and found a sandwich made with lots of vegetables and grilled meat stuffed between two thin slices of round bread. An aroma similar to pepper came from it. Suddenly, I felt really hungry and I took a large bite.

“It’s…really good…”

I bit into it twice, thrice in a row, and then uttered my sincere appreciation. The shape seemed somewhat European, like the food that the NPC restaurants offered, but the taste was different. The slightly sour and sweet flavor was definitely similar to the Japanese fast foods that I had eaten until two years ago. I ate the huge sandwich quickly, feeling like I was going to cry from the nostalgic taste.

After finishing the last piece and downing the tea that Asuna gave me, I finally gave a sigh.

“How did you manage this flavor…?”

“It’s the result of a year of training and experimentation. I made it after analyzing the data on how allllllll of the herbs affect the taste reproduction engine. This is glogwa seed, shuble leaf, and calim water.”

As Asuna said this, she took out two small bottles from the basket, opened one of them, and stuck her index finger in. The finger came out with some indescribable substance on it that was sticky and purple. Then she said,

“Open your mouth.”

I didn’t know what it was, but as I opened my mouth on reflex, and Asuna flung the substance into it. The gooey substance flew into my mouth accurately and its flavor amazed me.

“…It’s mayonnaise!”

“Those are abilpa beans, sag leaves, and uransipi bones.”

The last one sounded like the ingredient for an antidote, but the liquid flew into my mouth before I had any time to think about it. Its taste shocked me even more than the previous one. This was definitely soy sauce. I was so ecstatic that I grabbed Asuna’s hand and put her finger in my mouth.

“Kya!!”

She screamed and snatched her hand out while glaring at me. But then she started laughing at my expression.

“That’s what I made the sandwich out of.”

“…it’s amazing! Perfect! You could make a fortune with this!”

To tell the truth, the sandwich tasted even better than the Ragout Rabbit meal I had yesterday.

“R-Really?”

Asuna smiled sheepishly.

“No, it’d be better not to sell them. I can’t let my share disappear.”

“Uwa, you’re so greedy! …if you want, I’ll make it again for you sometime.”

She added the last bit quietly and leaned slightly against my shoulder. As a calm silence filled the room, I even forgot that this was the front lines, a place where we fought with our lives at stake.

If I could eat this sort of thing every day, I could steel my resolve and move to Salemburg…right next to Asuna's house… I started thinking this without realizing it, and just as I was about to say this out aloud-.

Suddenly, the clanking sound of armor heralded the arrival of another group of players. We quickly widened the distance between us.

I glanced at the leader of the six-man party and relaxed my shoulders. He was the katana-wielder that I had known for the longest time in Aincrad.

"Oh, Kirito! It's been a while!"

I stood up and greeted the tall person who had started to walk this way after recognizing me.

"You're still alive, Cline?"

"You're as foul-mouthed as ever. Why are you of all people in a par-ty…"

The katana-wielder's eyes went wide under his bandana as he saw Asuna, who had stood up after quickly packing away her things.

"Ah-, …you've probably already met each other during the boss fights, but I'll introduce you two anyway. This guy is Cline from the guild «Fuurinkazan», and this is Asuna from «Knights of the Blood»."

Asuna nodded lightly when I introduced her, but Cline just stood there, both his eyes and mouth wide open.

"Hey, say something. Are you lagging?"

After I jabbed him from the side, Cline finally closed his mouth and introduced himself in the politest way possible.

"H-Hello!!!!! I'm just a guy c-c-called Cline! Bachelor! Twenty-four!"

As Cline said something stupid in his confusion, I jabbed his side again, with more strength this time. But even before Cline finished talking, his party members had rushed up and began to introduce themselves.

They said that all the members of «Fuurinkazan» had known each other even before SAO had started. Cline had protected and guided all of them, without losing even a single member, until each of them had become a capable player of the front lines. He had managed to bear the weight that I had run away from in fear two years ago—the day that this death game began.

Ignoring the self-hatred that had deeply permeated my heart, I started speaking to Asuna,

"…well, they're not bad people, if you ignore the leader's thuggish face."

This time, Cline stomped down on my foot as hard as he could. Upon seeing this, Asuna started laughing, unable to hold back any longer. Cline smiled sheepishly, but then returned to his senses and asked me in a voice filled with murderous intent.

“H-H-How did this happen Kirito!?”

As I stood there with no answer coming to mind, Asuna responded for me in a clear voice:

“Nice to meet you. We’ve decided to party with each other for a while. I hope we get along.”

I was shocked by what I heard. As I thought ‘Eh!? This wasn’t just for today!?’, Cline and his party made expressions that switched between anger and depression.

Eventually, Cline glared at me with rage burning in his eyes and growled while grinding his teeth.

“Kirito, you bastard…”

I sagged my shoulders and thought that this was going to be hard to get out of. Then…

Footsteps resounded through the same doorway that Fuurinkazan had recently come through. Asuna tensed at the strangely uniform sound, then grabbed my arm and whispered.

“Kirito-kun, it’s «The Army»!”

I immediately turned my gaze towards the doorway, and sure enough, the heavily-armed unit that we’d seen in the forest came into sight. Cline raised his hand and got his five companions to back into the wall. The group that marched into the room, still in its twin column formation, was no longer as orderly as they had been in the woods. Their footsteps were heavier, and the expressions under their helmets seemed very tired.

They stopped at the wall opposite from us in the safe area. The man in front gave the order “dis-missed,” at which point the other eleven people collapsed onto the floor. The man then walked towards us without even glancing at them.

Now that I looked carefully, his equipment was somewhat different from the others. His armor was very high in quality, and a crest in the shape of Aincrad was engraved onto the chest—something none of the other eleven had.

He stopped in front of us and took off his helmet. He was pretty tall and appeared to be somewhere in his late thirties. He had a sharp face, very short hair, a pair of sharp eyes below his thick eyebrows, and a mouth that was tightly shut. He swept across us with his eyes, and then started speaking to me, who was the one in front of our group.

“I’m Lieutenant Colonel Cobert of the Aincrad Liberation Army.”

What the hell? «The Army» was originally a name that people had started calling them as a way of making fun of them. When did it become their official name? And «Lieutenant Colonel»? Feeling annoyed, I answered concisely:

“Kirito, Solo.”

He nodded and asked arrogantly:

“Have you mapped the area ahead of here?”

“…yeah. I’ve mapped the area all the way up to the boss room.”

“Hmm. Then I hope you would supply us with the mapping data.”

I was surprised by his attitude. But Cline, who was behind me, had gotten angry.

“What? Supply you with it!? You bastard, do you even know how hard mapping is!?”

He shouted in a hoarse voice. Maps of unexplored areas were important information. They could also be sold to treasure hunters, who sought out locked treasure chests, at high prices.

As soon as he heard Cline’s voice, the army guy raised one of his eyebrows and announced loudly.

“We are fighting for the freedom of players like you.”

He thrust his chin forward and continued.

“It is your duty to cooperate with us!”

-The word arrogance must exist for attitudes like his. The Army hadn’t even been on the front lines for a year now.

“Wait a second, how could you…”

“You, you bastard…”

Asuna and Cline, who had been standing on either sides of me, both stepped forward with their voices full of outrage. I spread my arms apart and stopped them.

“It’s okay. I was going to spread it around when I got back to the city anyway.”

“Hey, hey! You’re being way too kind Kirito!”

“I don’t have any plans to sell the maps for money.”

As I said this, I opened a trade window and sent the information over to the guy who called himself Lieutenant Colonel Cobert. He took it without any change in his expression and said:

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

He replied without a single note of gratitude in his voice, and then turned around to head back.

I said to his back:

“Some advice from me, you’re better off not attacking that boss.”

Cobert looked back.

“…that is for me to decide.”

“We checked out the boss room just a while ago. It’s not something you can tackle with just anyone. Besides, your men all seem pretty tired as well.”

“…my men aren’t such crybabies to be tired out by something like this!”

Cobert emphasized "my men" as he answered with annoyance. But the guys who sat on the floor didn’t seem to agree.

“Get up you useless pieces of trash!”

At Cobert’s command, they stood up shakily and reformed two columns. Cobert didn’t even spare us a glance as he returned to the front of the column and gestured with his arm. The twelve men then lifted their weapons and began to march once again, their heavy armor clanking away.

Although they still had 100% of their HP on the outside, the strenuous fights of SAO left a fatigue that couldn’t be seen. Our real bodies in the other world may not be moving a muscle, but the feeling of weariness still stayed until we either slept or rested on this side. Based on what I saw, those Army players were already exhausted, since they weren’t used to fighting on the front lines.

“…I wonder if they’ll be okay…”

Cline spoke in a worried voice as the Army members disappeared into the passageway that led to the higher floor and the rhythmic sound of their footsteps vanished from our ears. He really was a good person.

“They’re not really foolish enough to go and challenge the boss are they…?”

Asuna was worried as well. There was definitely something in Cobert’s voice that hinted at a sort of recklessness.

“…should we take a quick look at what they’re doing…?”

When I said this, not only did Cline and Asuna, but even the other five members of his party agreed.

…and they say that I’m too kind…

I thought this with a bitter smile. However, I had already made a decision. I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight if we left the Labyrinth now and heard that they never made it back.

As I quickly checked my equipment and started walking, a sound reached my ears-

I could tell that Cline was whispering to Asuna behind me. I was wondering if he hadn't received enough jabs when the content of their conversation surprised me.

"Ah—Asuna-san, how should I put this…that guy, Kirito, please treat him well. Even though he's not very good with words, isn't very fun, and is a battle-crazed idiot."

I dashed back and yanked Cline's bandana as hard as I could.

"Wh-What are you talking about!?"

"B-But."

The katana-wielder cocked his head and scratched his beard.

"It's remarkable that you're partying with someone. Even if it's because you fell for Asuna, it's still an extraordinary amount of progress. That's why I-"

"I-I didn't fall for her!"

I argued back. But for some reason, Cline, his party members, and even Asuna all looked at me with a smile on their face. I couldn't do anything except silently turn back around and keep walking.

Then I heard Asuna declare:

"Please leave him to me!"

I ran to the passageway that led up to the next floor while making a loud racket with my boots.

Chapter 11

Unfortunately for us, we ran into a group of Lizardmen on the way up. By the time the eight of us arrived at the top-floor passageway, thirty minutes had already passed, and we still hadn't caught up to the army members.

"Maybe they've already used their crystals to escape?"

Cline said jokingly, but none of us believed that they would have done that. As a result, we unconsciously sped up our footsteps as we walked down the long passage.

When we were about halfway down, a sound that confirmed our fears echoed off the walls. We all immediately stopped to listen.

"Ahhhh…"

The faded noise that we heard was, without a doubt, a scream.

But it didn't belong to a monster. We all looked at each other and then started sprinting. Because of our high dexterity, Asuna and I ran faster than everyone else, and a gap quickly opened up between us and Cline's group. But this wasn't the time for us to care about that. We dashed like the wind through the shining blue corridor in the opposite direction as we had gone last time.

Soon, the great double doors came into sight. They were already open, and we could see the blue flames flickering inside and a huge shadow moving slowly within its depth. We also heard the intermittent sounds of screaming and metals clashing.

"No…!"

Asuna screamed with grief and accelerated her speed. I followed closely behind her. Our feet were barely touching the ground, as if we virtually flew through the air. I figured that we had already reached the limits of the system's support. Meanwhile, the pillars on either side of the passage flashed past us.

As we neared the door, Asuna and I quickly reduced our speed. Sparks flew off our boots, and we managed to stop just barely in front of the gateway.

"Hey! Are you guys alright!?"

I shouted and leaned my body forward for a better view.

Inside—it looked like hell.

Bluish-white flames were burning all across the floor. A huge figure stood straight in the middle of all this, its body shining as if it was made out of metal. That was the blue demon: The Gleameyes.

As The Gleameyes flourished its enormous zanbato-like sword around, a huge flaming breath streaked out of its mountain goat head. The damage dealt to it hadn't even reached one-third of its HP. Across the room from it, there were a bunch of silhouettes, their sizes tiny compared to the demon. They were the army group, and their members were busy scrambling for their lives.

They no longer had any order to speak of. I checked the number of people and immediately noticed that two of them were missing. It would be good if they had escaped by using a teleport item, but-.

Even as I thought this, one of them was hit by the side of the zanbato and went flying. His HP had gone into the red danger zone. I don't know how it had gotten to this situation, but the demon had managed to get in between the Army members and the exit, and as a result they couldn't even flee. I shouted at the player who had fallen.

"What are you doing!? Use your teleport item!"

The man looked my way. His face reflected the bluish color of the flames and was full of despair. He then shouted:

"That doesn't work…! T-The crystals aren't working!!"

"Wha…"

I couldn't say anything. Did that mean that this room was a «Anti-Crystal Area»? It was a rare trap that appeared in dungeons once in a while, but it had never appeared in a boss room up till now.

"How can that…!"

Asuna breathed in sharply. This was a case when we couldn't even just rush in and save them. Then, a player on the other side of the demon raised his sword and shouted.

"What are you saying!! The word retreat does not exist for the Liberation Army!! Fight!! Fight I tell you!!"

It was definitely Cobert's voice.

"You bastard!"

I screamed. The fact that two people had already disappeared in a no-crystal area—it meant that they were already dead, already gone. Something that should be avoided at all costs had already happened, and this idiot was still saying those things? I felt my blood boil with rage.

Then Cline and his party arrived.

"Hey, what's happening!?"

I quickly told him what the current situation was. As he heard it, Cline's expression got darker.

"Isn't…isn't there anything we can do…?"

We might be able to run in and make a way for them to get out. But since an emergency escape was impossible in this room, we couldn't ignore the possibility that one of us could die as well. We just didn't have enough people. As I struggled with this thought, Cobert had somehow managed to get his men back into order and shouted.

"Charge-!"

Two of the ten had already lost almost their entire HP and were lying on the ground. The other eight had gotten into lines of four with Cobert in the center, who led the charge with his sword raised high.

"No-!!"

But my voice didn't reach them.

It was such a pointless attack. If all eight of them ran in together, they wouldn't be able to use their sword skills properly and would only add to the confusion. They should be fighting defensively, rotating in one person at a time to deal damage, and then quickly switching out for the next member.

The demon straightened up and gave a ground-shaking roar before breathing out a blinding jet of fire. It seemed as if the breath counted as a damage-inflicting attack, and the eight slowed as the blue light of the flames engulfed them. The demon seized its chance and swung its huge sword. The body of a person was knocked into the air, flew over the demon's head, and then crashed hard into the ground before us.

It was Cobert.

His HP had vanished. With an expression that didn't even seem to understand the situation, he slowly moved his mouth.

-This is impossible.

He said soundlessly. Then, with a nerve-rending sound effect that pierced our souls, his body had shattered into a swirl of polygons. Next to me, Asuna gave a short scream at this meaningless death.

With their leader gone, the Army members immediately fell into chaos. They ran around screaming. All of their HP counts were already below the halfway mark.

"No…no…no more…"

As I heard Asuna's strained voice, I glanced sideways towards her. I immediately rushed to grab her arm...

But I was already too late.

“No-!!”

With this scream, Asuna ran off like a gust of wind. She drew her rapier from thin air and charged at The Gleameyes like a flash of light.

“Asuna!!”

I screamed. With no other choices available, I drew my sword and followed her.

“Eh, whatever!!”

Cline and his party then shouted and followed suit.

Asuna’s reckless strike hit the back of the demon while its attention was elsewhere. But its HP hardly decreased at all.

The Gleameyes roared, then turned around and swung its zanbato downwards. Asuna immediately sidestepped to dodge, but she couldn’t evade it completely and was knocked down by the shockwave. The second strike then swung towards her without hesitation.

“Asuna-!!”

I felt my body go cold with fear as I flung myself between Asuna and the blade. My sword barely managed to deflect the attack in time. Then, I felt an impact across my whole body as the shockwave hit me.

As sparks flew off the two blades, the demon’s sword hit the floor only a few centimeters away from Asuna. It dug a huge hole into the ground with an explosion-like sound effect.

“Get back!”

I shouted and prepared for the demon’s attacks. Its sword came at me repeatedly with a crushing might that felt like it could take my life with one hit. There wasn’t any room for me to even attempt a counterattack.

The Gleameyes’ techniques were basically two-handed sword skills. But they were slightly customized, which made them impossible to read. I concentrated fully on defending with sidesteps and parries. But its attacks were monstrously powerful and chipped away at my HP with every passing swing.

“Argh!!”

Eventually, one of its strikes accurately hit my body. I felt its stunning impact, and my HP decreased immensely.

My equipment and skills were far from those of a tank. If I kept this up, it would only lead to my death. The fear of dying sent a chill down my body. I couldn’t even try to escape anymore.

There was only one thing that I could do. I would have to go against it with everything I had as a damage dealer.

“Asuna! Cline! Give me ten seconds!”

I shouted and swung my sword hard to block the demon’s blow and make a break point. Then, I flung myself to the ground and rolled away. Cline immediately took my place and kept the demon back with his katana.

But Cline’s katana and Asuna’s rapier were weapons that relied on speed and therefore lacked in weight. I figured that it wouldn’t be easy for them to block the demon’s zanbato. As I laid on the ground, I opened the menu with my left hand.

I couldn’t afford to make a single mistake now. With my heart pounding against my chest, I began moving the fingers of my right hand. I scrolled down my item list, picked something from it, and equipped it in the blank space on my equipment profile. Then I opened the skill window and changed my weapon skill.

After finishing all this, I touched the OK button and closed the window. I confirmed the additional weight on my back, then raised my head and shouted:

“I’m done!!”

I saw Cline get hit once, and his HP decreased as he stepped back. Normally, he should have used a crystal to heal himself, but that wasn’t possible in this room. Now, Asuna was fighting with the demon, and within just a few seconds her HP had already gone below the halfway mark and turned yellow.

After she heard me, Asuna nodded with her back towards me and gave a short shout before executing a piercing skill.

“Yaaaa!”

A white streak of light flew through the air and struck The Gleameyes’ weapon, causing sparks to spray out. As a loud noise resounded, the distance between Asuna and the demon widened.

“Switch!!”

I didn’t miss the opportunity and charged straight at the enemy. The demon quickly recovered from the short stunning effect and raised its sword high up into the air. With the sword in my right hand, I blocked the demon’s blade as it came down from a flame-like trajectory. Then, I reached behind my back with my left hand and grabbed the handle of the new sword. I drew it and struck in one smooth movement. The demon’s HP reduced noticeably as the first clean hit registered.

“Kwuaaaaa!”

The demon roared with rage and attempted another downward strike. This time, I crossed my two swords and blocked it completely. As its stance became unbalanced, I decided to break free from my defending streak and launched a combo attack.

My right sword slashed horizontally towards the demon's midsection. My left sword followed immediately to cut vertically into its body. Right, left, then right again. I swung my swords as if the nerves in my brain were going into overdrive. The sounds of metal clashing resounded loudly one after another as white lights flared through the air.

This was the extra skill that I had been hiding, «Dual Blades», and the technique I was using was its high-class sword skill «Starburst Stream», a sixteen-hit combo attack.

"Ahhhhh!!"

Paying no attention to the few hits that the demon's sword managed to block, I kept on screaming as I hacked away relentlessly with my swords. My eyes heated up, and my vision saw only the demon. Although the demon's sword still struck my body every so often, its impact felt like it was happening in some faraway world. Meanwhile, adrenaline continued to rush through my body, and my brain waves spiked every time my swords hit their mark.

Faster, faster. The rhythm of my swings already exceeded twice the normal speed, but it still felt slow to my heightened senses. I continued my attack at a pace that seemed to overtake even the system's assistance.

"…ahhhhhhhhh!!"

With this shout I launched the last of my sixteen strikes, which penetrated The Gleameyes' chest.

"Kkaaaaaaahh!!"

When my senses returned, I realized that I wasn't the only one screaming. The huge demon was roaring towards the ceiling as massive breaths streamed out of its mouth and nose.

Then its body froze, and as soon as I noticed that-

The Gleameyes shattered into countless blue shards. Fragments of blue light rained down across the room.

It's…finished…?

Feeling dizzy from the aftereffects of the battle, I habitually swung both of my swords once more before simultaneously sheathing them into the scabbards that lay crossed on my back. I immediately checked my HP. There was a red line with only a few dots left. As I stared at my HP without care, I suddenly felt strength leave my body and collapsed onto the floor without a sound.

My vision faded out into blackness.

Chapter 12

"…-kun! Kirito-kun!!"

Asuna's calls, which were almost like screams, forced me awake. As I sat up, pain spiked through my head and caused my face to distort.

"Owww…"

I looked around and saw that we were still in the boss room. Blue light fragments were still floating around the room. It seemed like I had only lost consciousness for a few seconds.

Asuna was kneeling on the ground, her face right before my eyes. Her eyebrows were tightened, and she was biting her lip. It looked like she was going to cry.

"You idiot…! Why…!?"

She shouted and then jumped into my arms and hugged me. It shocked me enough to make me forget my pain for a moment. I could only blink in surprise.

"…Don't hug me so tightly. You're going to make my HP disappear."

I said in a joking tone, but Asuna responded with a really angry expression. She shoved a small bottle into my mouth. The liquid which flowed in was a high-quality potion that tasted like a combination of lemon juice and green tea. It should fully heal my HP within five minutes, but my fatigue was going to last a while.

Asuna checked to confirm that I had drunk all of it. Then, as her face began to scrunch up, she put her forehead on my shoulder to hide it.

I raised my head at the sound of footsteps and saw Cline approach. He seemed a little apologetic for disturbing us, but started speaking nevertheless.

"We've finished healing all the remaining Army members, but Cobert and two of his men had already died…"

"…yeah. It's the first time since the sixty-seventh floor that someone died during a boss fight…"

"That wasn't even a fight. That idiot Cobert… You can't do anything if you're dead…"

Cline spat out. Then he took a deep breath, shook his head, and asked me in an attempt to change the mood.

"But back to the topic, what the hell was that just then!?"

"…I really have to explain it to you ?"

“Of course! I’ve never seen something like that before!”

I suddenly noticed that aside from Asuna, everyone in the room was looking at me, waiting for my reply.

“…it’s an extra skill: «Dual Blades».”

Expressions of amazement rose throughout Cline’s party and the survivors from the Army.

All weapon skills had to be learned in a certain order depending on their type. Take swords for an example; you had to train the one-handed straight sword skill quite a bit before «Rapier» and «Two-Handed Sword» appeared on the list.

Naturally, Cline was interested, and he urged me to tell the rest.

“The conditions that have to be met are?”

“I’d have told everyone if I knew that.”

As I shook my head, Cline sighed and muttered.

“You’re right…”

Weapon skills that didn’t have clear conditions for appearing are called extra skills. They were sometimes even called random conditions. An example would be Cline’s «Katana». But «Katana» wasn’t all that rare and appeared quite often as long as you kept training the Curved Sword skill.

Most of the ten-plus extra skills that had been found up until now, «Katana» included, had at least ten people who used each of them. The only exceptions were my «Dual Blades» and one other man’s extra skill.

These two were most likely limited to only one person, so they should be called «Unique Skill». I had hidden the existence of my unique skill up until now. But from today, the news that I was the second unique skill user would spread throughout the world. There was no way I could hide it after using it in front of so many people.

“I’m disappointed Kirito. You didn’t even tell me that you had such an awesome skill.”

“I would have told you if I knew the conditions for its appearance. But I really couldn’t figure out how it happened.”

I answered Cline’s complaint with a shrug.

There wasn’t a shred of lie in what I said. About a year ago, I opened my skills window one day and found the name «Dual Blades» just sitting there. I really had no clue on what conditions made it appear.

Since then, I only trained it when there was nobody around. Even after I nearly mastered it, I rarely used it against monsters unless it was an emergency. Aside from using it to protect myself in a crisis, I simply didn't like this kind of skill due to the attention it draws.

I even thought that it would be better if another Dual Blades user appeared-

I scratched the area around my ear and muttered.

"…if it became known that I had such a rare skill, not only would people pester me for information…it might attract other kinds of problems too…"

Cline nodded.

"Online gamers get jealous easily. I wouldn't since I'm an understanding guy, but there sure are plenty of envious people. Not to mention…"

Cline suddenly stopped talking and looked at Asuna, who was still tightly hugging me, and smiled meaningfully.

"…well, just consider suffering as another way of training yourself, young Kirito."

"So, to you it's just someone else's problem…?"

Cline bent over and thumped me on the shoulder, then turned around and walked towards the survivors of «The Army».

"Hey, you guys, do you think you'll be able to make it back to HQ by yourselves?"

One of them nodded at Cline's question. He was a boy who looked like he was in his teens.

"OK. Tell your superiors what happened here today and that they shouldn't do something this stupid again."

"Yes. …and, err…thank you."

"Thank him over there."

Cline pointed my way with his thumb. The players from the army stood up shakily, turned towards Asuna and I, who were still on the floor, and bowed deeply before walking out of the room. Once they reached the passageway, they used their crystals to teleport out one after another.

After the blue lights faded, Cline put his hands on his hips and started speaking.

"Well, let's see… We're going to continue onto the seventy-fifth floor and open the gate there. How 'bout you? You're the man of the day, so do you want to do it?"

"No, I'll leave it to you. I'm totally wiped."

“If that’s the case... be careful on your way back.”

Cline nodded and then signaled to his teammates. The six walked over to the huge door in the corner of the room. Behind it should be the stairs to the next floor. The katana-wielder stopped in front of the door and turned around.

“Hey… Kirito. Y’know when you jumped in to save those Army members…”

“…what about it?”

“I was…well, really glad. That’s all I have to say. See ya around sometime.”

I don’t get what he was trying to say. As I cocked my head, Cline gave me a thumbs-up, then opened the door and disappeared through it with his party.

Only Asuna and I were left in the huge boss room. The blue flames that had been flaring up from the floor had disappeared some time ago, and the sinister atmosphere that once filled the room had vanished without a trace. The soft light that filled the passageway now flooded this room as well. Not a single sign of the battle remained.

I said something to Asuna, who still had her head against my shoulder.

“Hey…Asuna…”

“…I was so scared… I didn’t know what I’d do… If you had died.”

Her shaking voice was weaker than I had ever heard it.

“…what are you talking about? You were the one who charged in first.”

I said this as I softly placed my hand on Asuna’s shoulder. A manner infraction flag would come up if I grabbed her too blatantly, but this really wasn’t a situation where I should worry about that.

As I gently pulled her towards me, my ears had almost missed her small voice.

“I’m going to take a short break from the guild.”

“T-Take a break… Why?”

“…I said that I was going to party with you for a while… Did you forget already?”

As soon as I heard that…

Somewhere deep within my heart, a feeling that could only be described as a strong longing reached out. It surprised even me.

I—solo player Kirito—was a person who had abandoned every other player in order to keep myself alive in this world. I was the coward who had turned his back on his only friend and ran away two years ago, on the day that all of this had started.

A person like me, who didn't even have any right to wish for a comrade—let alone something more than that.

I had already realized this in a painful and unforgettable way. I had sworn never to wish again, never to yearn for the care of others.

But-

My left hand, which had turned rigid, didn't want to let go of Asuna's shoulder. I just couldn't pull myself away from the virtual warmth of her body.

I buried this huge contradicting conflict inside me with an inexplicable emotion, and then answered with a short reply.

"…okay."

After hearing my response, Asuna's head nodded slightly on my shoulder.

The next day.

I had been hiding on the second floor of Egil's shop since this morning. I was sitting on a rocking chair with my legs crossed and was drinking a strangely flavored tea, which I figured was probably a defective product. I was also in a rather foul mood.

All of Algade—no, most probably all of Aincrad was busy discussing the events of yesterday.

Floor clearing, which meant the opening of a new city, was already enough to start an exorbitant amount of gossiping. But this time, various other rumors had also been mixed in, like «The demon that wiped out a whole Army battalion» and «The Twin Blade swordsman that killed the demon by himself with fifty hits»… There should be a limit on how much they can exaggerate these things by.

Somehow they had found out about where I lived. As a result, swordsmen and information dealers had crowded around my house since early morning. I ended up having to go through the trouble of using a teleport crystal to escape.

"I'm going to move… To some super-rural floor, to some village where they'll never be able to find me…."

As I endlessly muttered my complaints, Egil walked over to me with a smile.

"Hey, don't be like that. It's good to become famous for once in your life. Why don't you host a presentation? I'll take care of the tickets and the venue…"

“No way!”

I shouted and threw the cup in my right hand, aiming for the area about fifty centimeters to the right of Egil’s head. But I habitually made the motion which activated my Throw Weapon skill and hurled the cup towards the wall at a high speed. The cup left a trail of light before it smashed into the wall with a loud noise. Thankfully, the room was an indestructible object, so nothing else happened other than the appearance of the «Immortal Object» system tag. If I had hit a piece of furniture, it would have been destroyed for sure.

“Ah, are you trying to kill me here!?”

At the shopkeeper’s exaggerated shout, I raised my right hand as a sign of apology and leaned back against the chair once more.

Egil was currently examining the treasure I had received from yesterday’s fight. Every once in a while, he would make a strange noise, which most probably meant that there were some pretty valuable goods in there.

I had planned to equally share with Asuna the money I would get from selling the loot, but it was already past the promised meeting time and she still hadn’t arrived. I had already sent her a friend message, so she should know where I was…

We parted at the main street teleport gate of the seventy-fourth floor yesterday. She said that she was going to apply for a break and went to the KoB HQ in Grandum on the fifty-fifth floor. I asked her if I should go with her, given the trouble with Cradil and all. But she said it was fine with a smile on her face, so I abandoned the thought.

It was already two hours past the promised time. If she was this late, did it mean that something had happened? Should I have gone with her? I downed the cup of tea in a single gulp in order to calm my anxieties.

Just as I had drained the tea pot before me, and Egil had finished his examination of my items, I heard the sound of footsteps running up the stairs. Then, the door quickly crashed open.

“Hey, Asuna…”

I had almost said "you’re late" but stopped myself. Asuna was in her uniform as usual, but her face was white and worry shone through her eyes. She held both her hands in front of her chest, bit her lip twice or trice, and then said:

“What should we do…Kirito-kun…”

She forced out in a voice that was close to tears.

“Something…bad has happened…”

After drinking some newly-boiled tea, life managed to return to Asuna's face, and she started explaining a bit hesitantly. Egil had moved back down to the first floor after noticing the atmosphere.

"Yesterday…after I returned to the HQ in Grandum, I reported everything that had happened to the guild leader. Then I said that I wanted to take a break from the guild and then went back home… I had thought that I would get permission during the regular morning guild meeting…"

Asuna, who was sitting opposite of me, lowered her eyes and grabbed her tea cup tightly before she continued.

"The leader…said that I could take a brief leave from the guild. But there was one condition… He said that…he wanted to have a fight…with Kirito-kun…"

"What…?"

I couldn't understand what she meant for a moment. Fight…did that mean a duel? What did a duel have to do with Asuna taking a break?

When I asked these questions…

"I don't know either…."

Asuna shook her head while looking at the floor.

"I tried to persuade him that there's no meaning in doing that…but he just wouldn't listen to me…"

"But…this is problematic. For that guy to suddenly present a condition like this…"

I muttered as the image of the guild leader flashed through my mind.

"I know. The leader usually leaves us alone even when we're planning our strategy for clearing floors, let alone everyday guild activities. But I don't know why this time he…"

Although the KoB leader had overwhelming charisma, which attracted the admiration of not only all his guild members but also most of the front lines people, he never gave any instructions or orders. I fought besides him during a couple of boss fights as well and greatly admired his ability to maintain the line without a single word.

For such a guy to put forth an objection with the condition of having a duel with me, just what on earth could it be about?

Even though I was completely confused, I spoke in order to calm Asuna down.

"…well, let's go to Grandum first. I'll try talking to him directly."

"Yeah… Sorry. I'm always causing you trouble…"

“I’ll gladly do anything, because you’re my…”

Asuna looked at me expectantly as I stopped in the middle of my sentence.

“…important partying partner.”

Asuna pouted with dissatisfaction, then revealed a warm smile.

The Strongest Man, The Living Legend, The Paladin, and et cetera— the leader of the Knights of the Blood had so many titles that you couldn’t count them with your hands.

His name was Heathcliff. Before my «Dual Blades» became widely known, he was renowned as the only unique skill user amongst the six thousand players of Aincrad.

His extra skill used a sword and shield combination, both of which were cross-shaped, and allowed the user to switch freely between attack and defense. It was named «Holy Sword». I had seen it myself a couple of times and noticed that the skill’s most remarkable aspect was its overwhelming defensive strength. Rumors claim that no one had ever seen his HP go into the yellow zone. During the fiftieth floor boss fight which had inflicted heavy casualties on the players, he had managed to hold the line by himself for ten whole minutes. This achievement remained a popular topic of conversation even today.

There was no weapon that could pierce Heathcliff’s cross-shaped shield.

This was one of the most widely-accepted tenets within Aincrad.

As I arrived on the fifty-fifth floor with Asuna, I felt an indescribable nervousness. Of course, I had no intention of crossing swords with Heathcliff. I was merely going to ask him to accept Asuna’s request for a temporary break from the guild; that was my only goal.

Grandum, the living area of the fifty-fifth floor, was nicknamed «Steel City». This was because Grandum, unlike the other cities which were built with stone, was mostly comprised of huge towers that were made of shining black steel. Since the city had a large number of blacksmiths, its player population was quite high. However, there weren’t any trees or other greenery alongside the streets, which gave off a feeling that this city was harshly unforgiving in the winter winds.

We came through the gate plaza and walked along the road, which was made with steel plates locked into position with rivets. Asuna’s footsteps seemed heavy; maybe it was because she was afraid of what might happen.

We walked amongst the steel towers for about ten minutes until an even larger tower loomed before us. Silver spears protruded out above the huge gates, while white flags with red crosses swayed in the cold wind. It was the HQ of the Knights of the Blood guild.

Asuna stopped in front of me. She looked up at the tower for a while and then said:

“Before, the HQ was a small house in a countryside village on the thirty-ninth floor. Everyone always complained that it was too small and crowded. I’m not against the guild expanding…but this city is too cold, and I don’t like it…”

“Let’s just get this over with quickly; then we can go get something warm to eat.”

“You’re always talking about eating.”

Asuna smiled and moved her left hand to gently grasp the fingers of my right hand. She didn’t even look at me, who was perplexed at her behavior, and just stood there like that for a few seconds.

“Okay, charging complete!”

Then she released my hand and began to walk towards the tower in long strides. I hurried to follow behind her.

After going up the stairs, we came across two wide-open gates, although there were two heavily-armored guard equipped with a particularly long spear on each side. Asuna walked over to them, the heels of her boots clanking against the floor. As she approached them, both of the guards greeted her by raising their spears off the ground.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

With her crisp response and her confident stride, it was hard to believe that this was the same depressed girl who had been in Egil’s shop just an hour ago. Following closely behind Asuna, I passed the guards and entered the tower with her.

Like the other buildings of Grandum, this tower was also built from black steel. Its first floor was a spacious lobby, but there wasn’t a single person here right now.

Thinking that the building felt even colder than the streets outside, we walked past the mosaic floor, which had been meticulously constructed from numerous metal pieces, and came to a spiral staircase.

We went up the stairs; our footsteps echoing through the hall. The staircase climbed so high, a person with low vitality stats would have collapsed halfway up. After passing countless doors, I started to worry about how much further we would still have to go. Then Asuna finally stopped in front of a cold steel door.

“This is…?”

“Yeah…”

Asuna nodded with an expression of reluctance on her face. But she seemed to have arrived at a decision right away. She raised her right hand, knocked loudly on the door, and then opened it without waiting for a reply. I squinted as bright light poured out from the room.

Inside was a round room that took up an entire floor of the tower. The walls on all four sides were made of transparent glass windows. The light that filtered through them colored the room in a monotone gray.

A huge semi-circular table stood in the center of the room; five men sat in the chairs behind it. I had never seen the four on the sides, but I recognized the one in the middle all too well. He was the paladin Heathcliff.

He didn't look all that imposing. His age was probably around twenty-five. His features were sharp like that of a scholar, and a strand of steel-grey hair hung over his forehead. The richly red robe draped around his tall, thin body made him seem more like a wizard that didn't exist in this world than a swordsman.

But the most prominent features were his eyes. Those mysterious brass eyes emitted a strong magnetism that overwhelmed people. This wasn't even my first time meeting him; but to be truthful, I was still intimidated.

Asuna walked over to the table, the sound of her boots echoing, and gave a light salute.

"I've come to say my farewell."

Heathcliff gave a bitter smile in response:

"There's no need to rush. Please allow me to talk to him for a bit first."

He looked my way as he said that. I drew back my hood and stood next to Asuna.

"Is this the first time I've met you outside of a boss fight, Kirito?"

"No…we had talked for a while during the sixty-seventh floor strategy meeting."

I answered in a formal tone without realizing it.

Heathcliff nodded slightly and clasped his hands together on top of the table.

"That was a difficult battle. We almost took some casualties within our guild. Even though they call us the top guild, we're always short on people. Yet now you are trying to take away one of our precious top players."

"If she's so precious, how about putting more thought in selecting her bodyguards?"

The man on the furthest right began to stand up at my sharp retort, his expression changing. But Heathcliff stopped him with simple wave of the hand.

"I've ordered Cradil to return to his house and reflect upon his mistakes. I must apologize for the trouble we have caused you. But, we cannot just stand aside and allow you to take our sub-leader away. Kirito-"

He suddenly glared at me; his sharp metallic eyes showed an unwavering will behind them.

“If you want to take her—win her with your sword, with «Dual Blades». If you fight me and win, then Asuna can go with you. But if you lose, then you will have to join the Knights of the Blood.”

“…”

I feel like I could finally understand a bit of this mysterious man.

He was someone obsessed with sword duels. Furthermore, he had unshakable confidence in his own skills. He was a hopeless person who could not throw away his pride as a gamer despite being trapped in this inescapable game of death. In other words, he was the same as me.

After hearing Heathcliff’s words, Asuna, who had been silent until now, opened her mouth and spoke as if she couldn’t take any more of this.

“Leader, I didn’t say that I would quit the guild. I just wanted a temporary leave, to get away and think about some things…”

I placed my hand on Asuna’s shoulder, whose words had become more agitated, and took a step forward. I faced Heathcliff’s gaze directly, and my mouth moved almost by itself.

“Okay. If you want to talk through our swords, then I have no objections. We’ll decide this with a duel.”

“Auu--!!! Idiotidiotidiot!!!”

We were back in Algade, on the second floor of Egil’s shop. After chasing the curious shopkeeper back to the first floor, I tried to calm Asuna down.

“I was trying so hard to convince him, yet you just had to say something like that!!!”

Asuna was sitting on the armrest of the rocking chair I was on and was using her tightly balled fists to grind against me.

“I’m sorry! I’m reaaaally sorry! I just went with the flow and…”

She finally calmed down after I gently grabbed her fists; but now she was pouting. I had to forcibly keep myself from laughing at the huge gap between her behavior at the guild HQ and that of right now.

“It’s fine. We’ve decided on using first strike rules, so there’s no danger involved. Besides, it’s not like I’m definitely going to lose…”

“Uu~~~~…”

Asuna made an angry noise and crossed her thin, long legs atop the armrest.

"…when I saw Kirito-kun's «Dual Blades», I thought that your skill was on a totally different level. But it's the same for the leader's «Holy Sword»… One could say that his power was strong enough to destroy the game's balance. Truthfully, I really don't know who'll win… But what are you going to do? If you lose, it doesn't matter if I can't take a break, but you'll have to join KoB, Kirito-kun."

"Well, you could say that I would still achieve my goal, depending on how you think about it."

"Eh? Why?"

I had to force my mouth open to respond.

"Err, well, as…as long as Asuna is with me, I don't mind joining the guild."

In the past, I would never have said something like this, even if it was to save my own life. Asuna's eyes went wide with surprise, and her face turned as red as a ripe apple. Then, for some reason, she fell quiet, got up from the armrest, and walked over to the window.

From across Asuna's shoulders, I could hear the everyday sounds of Algade under the setting sun.

What I just said was the truth, but I still felt reluctant about becoming part of a guild. As I remembered the name of the only guild that I had ever belonged to, which no longer exists today, a sharp pain ached in my heart.

'Well, I have no intention of losing…'

I thought to myself, then got up from the chair and walked over to Asuna.

Soon afterwards, Asuna rested her head softly against my right shoulder.

Chapter 13

The newly opened living area on the seventy-fifth floor was a city reminiscent of ancient Rome. According to the map, its name was «Collinia». The entire city was already filled with activity, thanks to the large numbers of fighters and merchants that have settled in, as well as others who took no part in clearing the game but had come to sightsee. On top of all that, a rare special event would be held here today, so guests had been pouring out of the teleport gate since this morning.

The city was mostly constructed from square bricks of white limestone. One building stood out amongst its temple-like buildings and wide waterways; that was the huge coliseum which towered in front of the gate plaza. It was perfect for holding the duel between Heathcliff and me. But…

“Fire-breathing popcorn for ten Coll a cup! Ten Coll!”

“Cold black beer for sale~!”

Numerous merchants were selling their goods in front of the coliseum entrance; they were calling out to the long line of spectators and selling them strange looking refreshments.

“…this, what on earth is this…?”

Shocked by the sight unfolding before me, I could only ask Asuna, who was standing beside me.

“I-I don’t know…”

“Hey, isn’t that a KoB member selling the tickets!? How on earth did it turn into such a large event!?”

“I-I don’t know…”

“Is this Heathcliff’s real goal…?”

“No, I think that the head of finances, Daigen-san, is the one behind this. He wouldn’t miss an opportunity like this.”

As Asuna laughed, I sagged my shoulders and felt completely powerless.

“…let’s run away Asuna. We can go live in some small village on the twentieth floor and plow fields.”

“I’m fine with that, but…”

Asuna then added teasingly:

“You’ll make a rea-lly bad name for yourself if you run away now.”

“Damn-it…”

“Well, it’s your own fault, isn’t it? Ah…Daigen-san.”

As I lifted my head, I saw a fat man who was waddling towards us; he was so wide that it was impossible to find a person less suited to wear the red-white uniform of the KoB.

With a wide smile covering his round face, he started talking to us:

“Thanks ta Kirito-san we’re makin’ lotsa money! If ya jus’ did it once every month I’d be really thankful!”

“No way!!”

“Come, come, the waitin’ room’s over here. Come on, this way please.”

I resigned myself to my fate and followed him. I didn’t even care about what would happen anymore.

The waiting room was a small place that faced the arena. After Daigen escorted me to the entrance, he said something about adjusting the betting prices and disappeared. I didn’t even have the energy to curse him anymore. From the waiting room, I could hear countless indistinct cheers outside. It seemed that the audience seating was already filled.

When only the two of us remained, Asuna grasped my palm with both her hands and spoke with a serious expression.

“…even if it’s a First Strike match, it’ll be dangerous if you get directly hit by a strong critical strike. Especially since many of the leader’s moves aren’t even known, you should forfeit as soon as you feel something is wrong, understood? I’ll never forgive you if you do something dangerous again like last time!”

“You should be worrying about Heathcliff more.”

I smiled and tapped both of Asuna’s shoulders.

As an announcement declared the start of the duel, the crowd gave off a thunderous roar. I pulled the two swords on my back out by a bit, and then slid them back into their scabbards with a clang. After that, I began to walk towards the square light hoop on the field.

The step seating that ringed the amphitheater was fully packed with people. My guess is that there were at least a thousand spectators. I could see Cline and Egil on the front rows, screaming dangerous things like “dice him up” and “kill him.”

I walked to the center of the arena before stopping. Then, a deep red silhouette emerged from the opposite waiting room, and the cheering became even more intense.

Unlike the normal Knights of the Blood uniform, which was red on white, Heathcliff wore a red surcoat that was the complete opposite. Although he was like me and wore almost no

armor, he held a huge, pure-white, cross-shaped shield in his left hand, which had immediately caught my attention. His sword seemed to be sheathed within the shield, as I could see the cross-shaped handle protruding from its top.

Heathcliff walked casually until he stood right before me. He glanced at the crowd and then spoke with a bitter smile.

“I must apologize, Kirito-kun. I really had no idea that this was going to happen.”

“I’m going to be asking for my share of the money.”

“No… After this fight you’ll be part of our guild. I’ll be designating this duel as one of the guild’s missions.”

Heathcliff then erased his smile, and his brass colored eyes started giving off an overwhelming energy. Intimidated, I unconsciously took half a step back. In reality, we were probably lying down at places far away from each other, with only digital data being passed between us. But, I still felt something that could only be called killing intent.

My mind went into its battle state, and my eyes received Heathcliff’s gaze head on. The loud cheering sounded as if it was moving further away. Before I realized it, my senses had already begun to quicken, and it felt like even the colors of the surroundings had changed.

Heathcliff turned his gaze and walked to a spot about ten meters away from me. He then raised his right hand and manipulated the menu screen that appeared without even glancing at it. A duel message appeared in front of me. I consented and set the mode to first strike.

The countdown started. I could barely hear the shouts around me now.

My blood began to pump faster. I vanquished the last remaining bits of hesitation and let loose my desire to fight. Then I drew my two swords at the same time from behind my back. My opponent wasn’t someone I could win against unless I went all out from the beginning.

Heathcliff drew his thin, long sword from his shield, and then held it resolutely as he entered his combat stance.

He stood with his shield turned towards me and the right side of his body away from me. I couldn’t feel any forced strength behind his stance. I realized that trying to predict his actions would only confuse me further, and decided to simply charge in immediately and attack with full power.

Even though neither of us glanced at the window, we both kicked off as soon as the «Duel» message appeared.

I lowered my stance as I ran; my body nearly scraping the floor as it glided in.

I twisted my body around right before reaching Heathcliff and swung the sword in my right hand upwards to the left. It was blocked by the cross-shaped shield and sent out a burst of

sparks. But my attack was part of a two hit combo. Point one second after the first strike, my left sword slid in behind the shield. It was a Dual Blades dash-type skill «Double Circular».

The strike from the left was deflected by the long sword; its circular lighting effect stopped midway. Although it was disappointing, this move was just a signal for beginning the fight. Using the force of the sword skill, I widened the distance between us and then charged at my opponent again.

This time, Heathcliff countered by charging me with his shield. His right arm was hidden behind his huge cross-shaped shield, making it hard to see.

“Che!”

I dashed to my right in an attempt to evade his attack. I thought that if I stayed on Heathcliff’s shield side, I would have enough time to react to his attacks even if I couldn’t see the trajectory.

But then Heathcliff lifted his shield up horizontally.

"Haa!"

With this low shout, he executed a piercing attack with his shield. It came at me, leaving a trail of pure white light.

"Ahh!!"

I just managed to guard by crossing my two swords. The powerful impact rattled my entire body and sent me flying back by several meters. I dug my right sword into the ground to stop myself from falling over and then flipped in midair before landing.

It was unexpected, but it seemed that the shield itself could also be used as a weapon. It was similar to Dual Blades in a sense. I had originally thought that my overwhelming attack speed would allow me to win in a first strike duel; but it seemed that I was wrong.

Heathcliff dashed towards me, closing the distance between us and denying me of any time to recover. The sword with the cross-shaped hilt in his right hand pierced towards me at a speed that could rival Asuna the «Flash».

As the opponent started his combo attack, I could only use both of my swords to defend. Before the duel, Asuna had explained as much as she could about «Holy Sword»; but it seemed that cramming just wasn't enough. Therefore, I could only rely on split-second decisions to block the incoming blows.

After using my left sword to parry the last upward slash of his eight strike combo, I immediately attempted a one-hit sword skill, «Vorpal Strike», with my right.

"Hya…aaa!!"

With the metallic noise of a jet engine, the sword skill left a red trail of light before striking the center of his shield. It felt as if I had hit a stone wall; but my hands kept going to finish the strike.

Claang!! The sound of the impact rang out, and this time Heathcliff was pushed back. I couldn't completely pierce the shield, but I felt the feeling of having «penetrated» his defense. Heathcliff's HP had been reduced slightly, but not enough to decide the fight.

Heathcliff landed agilely and widened the distance between us.

"…impressive reaction time."

"More like your defense is too perfect…!!"

I charged as I said this. Heathcliff also raised his sword and closed in on me.

We started trading blows at blinding speeds. My sword was blocked by his shield; his sword was deflected by mine. Various light trails of different colors appeared and faded continuously around us, while the sounds of our weapons clashing shook the arena floor. A minor blow made it through every once a while, and our HP decreased bit by bit. Even if both

players failed to make a clean hit, one would win the moment their opponent's HP fell below fifty percent.

But I didn't care about that anymore. I felt myself accelerating in exhilaration, as this was the first time I had faced such a strong opponent since being trapped in SAO. Every time my senses sharpened, the speed of my attacks rose by another notch.

I still haven't reached my limit. I can still get faster. Follow me if you can, Heathcliff!!!

As I released every ounce of strength at my disposal, I drowned myself in the savage joy of swinging my swords. I was most probably laughing. While the exchange of sword blows intensified, the HP of both sides continued to decrease until they nearly reached the fifty-percent area.

At that instant, Heathcliff's stoic face finally showed a flash of emotion.

What was it? Nervousness? I felt the speed of his blows decrease just a little.

"Haaaa!"

In that moment, I abandoned all defenses and launched an assault with both of my swords: «Starburst Stream». My blades rushed towards Heathcliff like the blazing flames of a solar prominence.

"Argh…!!"

Heathcliff raised his cross-shaped shield to guard. But I just ignored it and kept hacking away at him from the right, left, up, and down. Meanwhile, his responses became even slower.

-I can break through!!

I was certain that the last strike would breach his defense. With his shield overextended to the right, my attack from the left streaked in, drawing a trajectory of light. As long as this blow lands, his HP will definitely fall below the halfway mark, and I would win the-

Then, at this moment, my entire world shook.

"-!?"

How should I describe it? It was as if some of my time had been taken away from me.

For several tenths of a second, everything around me seemed to freeze; everything except Heathcliff. The shield that should have been on the right suddenly appeared on the left, as if I was watching a stop motion video, and blocked my sword.

"Wha-!"

I was stunned for a fatal moment after the strong attack was blocked. There was no way that Heathcliff would have lost that chance.

The long sword in his right hand launched a one-hit skill, which came at me with a detestable accuracy that would surely decide the match. I fell into an unsightly heap. I could see the purple system message, which announced that the duel had ended, with the corner of my eye.

My battle state had disappeared. I simply laid there, my mind blank, even as the cheering registered in my head once again.

“Kirito-kun!!”

Asuna ran over and shook me back to my senses.

“Ah…yeah… I’m fine.”

Asuna looked at my blank expression with worry.

I lost-?

I still couldn’t believe it. Heathcliff’s unearthly speed during those final moments had gone past the limits of a player—past the limits of any human. I even saw the polygons that made up his avatar distort for a moment because of the impossible speed.

As I sat on the ground, I raised my head and gazed at Heathcliff’s face.

But the expression of the winner was angry for some reason. The red paladin glared at us with his metallic eyes, then turned around wordlessly and walked over to his waiting room amidst the thunderous cheering.

Chapter 14

"Wha...what is that!?"

"What do you mean? You know what this is. Now come on, get up!"

The things that Asuna had forced me into were my new clothes. Although it had the same design as the coat I used to wear, it was also blindingly white. There were two small crosses on each of my cuffs and a large one on my back; all three of them were dyed in bright red. It was, beyond any doubt, a KoB uniform.

"...I-I said I wanted something plain..."

"This is already pretty plain. Yeah, it suits you!!"

I sank into the rocking chair as all strength left my body. I was still living on the second floor of Egil's shop. The place had already become my disaster shelter, so the pitiable shopkeeper could only sleep on a simple bed on the first floor. The only reason he hadn't chased me out was because Asuna came every other day to help out with the shop. It was the best advertising opportunity he could get.

As I groaned in my chair, Asuna came and sat down on the armrest, which had become her designated spot. She rocked the chair with a smile, as if my current predicament was amusing to her, and then clapped her hands together as if she had thought of something.

"Ah, we better say our greetings properly. As a member of the guild, I hope we can get along well."

As she suddenly bowed, I straightened my back to reply.

"I-I hope we get along too...but then again, I'm just a normal member while you're the sub-leader, so..."

I swept my right forefinger down Asuna's spine.

"I won't be able to do things like this anymore-."

"Kyaa!"

With this scream, my superior jumped up and struck her subordinate's head. Then she walked over to the opposite chair and sat down; her face pouting.

Under the lazy sunlight of late autumn, we went into a short and peaceful lull.

My loss in the duel against Heathcliff had passed two days ago. As I wasn't someone who would go back on his word, I joined the Knights of the Blood as I had agreed with Heathcliff. The guild gave me two days to prepare, so starting tomorrow I would be following their orders to explore the seventy-fifth floor labyrinth.

Joining a guild, huh-.

Asuna glanced at me as she heard my quiet sigh.

"...you got mixed up in all this because of me."

"Nah, it's fine. It's a good opportunity for me. I was starting to feel the limits of solo playing anyway..."

"It's a relief to hear you say that... Hey, Kirito-kun..."

Asuna's hazelnut eyes looked directly at me.

"Can you tell me why you avoid guilds...avoid people...? I don't think it's merely because you're a beta tester or a unique skill user, because you are a very kind person."

I shifted my gaze downwards and slowly rocked my chair.

"...a long time ago...over a year actually, I once joined a guild...."

The words came out so easily that it surprised me. Maybe it was because Asuna's gaze felt like it would be able to melt the pain that spiked through me every time I thought about this.

"I was offered a spot after I met and helped them by chance in a labyrinth area... It was a small guild with only six members, including me, and it had an interesting name: «Black Cats of the Full Moon»."

Asuna smiled lightly.

"The leader was a good person. He was a two-handed staves user called Keita. He always thought of the guild members first in any situation, so everyone trusted him deeply. He told me that he was on the lookout for a forward, since most of the members used longer-ranged two-handed weapons..."

To tell the truth, their levels were all much lower than mine. No, I should say that I had leveled too much.

If I had told him my level, Keita would have thought otherwise about inviting me. But I had been getting tired of going into the Labyrinths alone day after day, and the family-like atmosphere of the «Black Cats» had made me envious. It felt like they were real-life friends, as the conversations they had with each other lacked any of the awkwardness and distance that was usually evident in online conversations between players; that had deeply appealed to me as well.

Frankly, I had no right to desire for the care of others. I had lost that right when I decided to become a solo player and selfishly leveled only for myself. But I had quelled my inner voices and joined the guild, hiding both my level and my beta-tester past.

Keita asked me if I could train one of their spear users into a sword-and-shield user. Because then there would be three forwards, including myself, and the guild would make a balanced party.

The spear user who he had entrusted to me was a quiet girl with shoulder-length black hair named Sachi. When we were introduced, she said, with an embarrassed smile, that despite being a long-time gamer, she hadn't been able to make many friends due to her personality. Whenever there were no guild activities, I had hung out with her and taught her how to use her single-handed sword.

Sachi and I were similar in a lot of ways. We were both socially awkward, preferred to wall ourselves in, and yet feared loneliness.

Then one day, she suddenly told me that she was afraid of dying, that she was so scared of this game of death that she didn't want to go out and train.

In response to her divulgence, I could only say "I won't let you die." I couldn't say anything else to her since I was still trying to hide my level. After she heard my response, she cried for a bit before forcing out a smile.

On another day, some time later, the five of us, all of the guild excluding Keita, went into a labyrinth. Keita didn't come with us because he had gone to bargain for a house to use as our HQ with the money that we had managed to save up.

Although the labyrinth we went to had already been cleared, there were still unexplored areas within it. One of the members discovered a treasure chest when we were preparing to leave. I recommended leaving it alone, as we were close to the front lines so the monsters had high levels. Furthermore, I didn't trust the trap dismantling skills of the members. But since only Sachi and I opposed opening the treasure chest, we lost 3 to 2 on the vote.

It was an alarm trap, one of the worst types of traps. As soon as we opened the chest, an ear-splitting alarm sounded, and monsters began to pour in from every entrance to the room. We immediately attempted to escape by teleporting.

But the trap was twofold. The room was an Anti-Crystal Area—our crystals didn't work.

There were simply too many monsters to hold back. The other members fell into complete confusion and ran around aimlessly. I tried to cut a path open by using the high class sword skills that I had been hiding up until now, but the panicked members didn't make it out in time. One by one, their HP fell to zero, and they screamed before bursting into tiny fragments. I thought that I could at least save Sachi and swung my sword endlessly.

But it was too late. I saw Sachi reaching out towards me with her hand while a monster cut her down mercilessly. Her eyes were still trusting even as she shattered like a glass statue and disappeared. She had trusted and relied on me until the very end; but because my words were weak and shallow, they had become nothing more than an empty promise, a lie.

Keita had been waiting for us in the inn that had served as our temporary base with the new HQ keys in his hands. After returning to the inn by myself, I explained to Keita what had happened. He had listened wordlessly until I finished, then asked me:

"How did you survive?"

Then I revealed my real level and that I had been a beta tester.

Keita had glared at me as if I was something disgusting, then said one thing.

-A beater like you didn't have any right to join us.

Those words had stabbed through me as if they were a steel sword.

"...what happened...to that person...?"

"He committed suicide."

Asuna's body shuddered on the chair.

"He jumped off the edge of the floor. Most probably cursing me...to the very end..."

I felt my throat contract. As I recounted these memories that I had sealed deep inside my heart, the painful emotions of back then returned with perfect clarity. I gritted my teeth. Although I wanted to reach out to Asuna for comfort, a voice in my mind whispered, "you have no right to do so," which left me with only the option of tightly clenching my fists.

"I had killed them. If I didn't hide the fact that I was a beta tester, I would have been able to persuade them to leave the chest alone. It was me... I'm the one who had killed Keita... and Sachi..."

With my eyes wide open, I forced these words out of my gritted teeth.

Asuna suddenly stood up, took two steps towards me, and caressed my face with both her hands. She pulled her beautiful face closer to mine with a warm smile.

"I won't die."

She said it in a whisper, yet the voice was very clear. I felt the strength leave my tensed body.

"Because, I'm... I'm somebody who'll protect you."

After saying this, Asuna brought my head to her chest and embraced it. I felt a soft and warm darkness cover me.

As I closed my eyes, my mind reached over the dark veil of my memories and saw the faces of the Black Cat members; they were all sitting at the Inn's counter, bathed in an orange glow.

I cannot be forgiven. I can never pay the price for my wrongdoings.

Yet despite this, the faces that remained in my memories seemed to be smiling.

On the next day, I put on my blindingly white coat and left with Asuna for Grandum on the fifty-fifth floor.

Starting today, I would begin my work as a Knights of the Blood guild member. However, in contrast to the usual five-person party, Asuna took advantage of her power and allowed us to form a two-person party; so in reality, it was no different from yesterday.

But the orders that awaited us at the guild HQ were totally unexpected.

"Training...?"

"Yes. We will make a party of four and go through the Labyrinth Area in the fifty-fifth floor until we reach the living area of the fifty-sixth floor."

The man who said this was one of the four other men who were present at the table when I had talked with Heathcliff. He was a huge man with thick blond curls and looked like an axe wielder.

"Wait, Godfrey! Kirito-kun is going to..."

As Asuna started arguing, Godfrey raised one eyebrow and responded in a confident, if not presumptuous, voice.

"Even the sub-leader must adhere to the rules. I don't mind the party he joins for exploration. But as the commander of the vanguard, I must test his capabilities. Even if he is a unique skill user, we don't actually know if he'll be of any use to us."

"W-With Kirito-kun's strength, there's no way he'll be an inconvenience..."

I calmed the agitated Asuna down before speaking:

"If you want to see, then I'll show you. But I don't want to waste time in such a low-level labyrinth. Would rushing through it in one run be alright with you?"

Godfrey closed his mouth with an expression of displeasure. Then he left after saying:

"Assemble at the west city gate in thirty minutes."

"What kind of attitude is that!?"

Asuna kicked the steel pillar with her boots in indignation.

"I'm sorry, Kirito-kun. Maybe it would have been better if we had run away..."

"If we did that, all the members of the guild would collectively curse me to death."

I smiled and hit Asuna's head playfully.

"Uuuu, I thought that we would be together today...should I go along with you...?"

"I'll be back soon. Just wait here."

"Yeah...be careful..."

Asuna nodded reluctantly. After waving my hand towards her, I walked out of the HQ.

But when I arrived at the appointed location—the west gate of Grandum—I saw something even more shocking.

Next to Godfrey stood the person who I least wanted to see in this world—Cradil.

Chapter 15

"…what is this?"

I asked Godfrey quietly.

"Hmm, I already know what happened between you two. But since you're comrades within the same guild from now on, I thought this would be a good opportunity to work out the bad blood between you two."

As I watched Godfrey laugh with his head up in the air, Cradil slowly walked towards me.

"…"

I tensed and prepared to react to any situation. Even though we were in a safe area, there was no telling what he might do.

But against all my expectations, Cradil suddenly bowed. He then muttered in a barely-audible voice under his long hair.

"I'm…sorry for causing you trouble last time…"

This time I was genuinely shocked. My jaw dropped in amazement and I was left wordless.

"I won't act so rudely again… I hope you will forgive me…"

I couldn't see his expression under his long, greasy hair.

"Ah…yeah…"

As I forced myself to nod, I wondered what in the world had happened. Did he get a personality altering surgery or something?

"Yes, yes. Well, that's all taken care of now!!"

Godfrey gave another hearty laugh. I felt really suspicious; Cradil must be up to something, but I couldn't guess from looking at his lowered head. In contrast to its overstated emotions, SAO had a hard time portraying subtle expressions. I could only accept his apology for now, but I reminded myself not to let my guard down.

The last member arrived after a while, and then we set off for the labyrinth. Just as I began to step into my pace, Godfrey stopped me with a gruff voice:

"Wait… Today's training will be done under the most realistic circumstances. I want to see how well you deal with dangerous situations, so I will be taking all of your crystals."

"…even our teleport crystals?"

Godfrey only nodded in response. I hesitated. Crystals, especially teleport crystals, were the last safety net in this death game. I had never been without them. I was about to refuse, but a problem here might put Asuna in a problematic situation, so I decided to hold back my words.

Seeing as Cradil and the other member handed over their crystals obediently, I had no choice but to follow. Godfrey even carefully checked my inventory afterwards.

“Hmm, good. Then let’s go!”

At Godfrey’s order, we walked out of Grandum and journeyed towards the Labyrinth Area that we could see to the far west.

The fifty-fifth floor training area was a desolate wasteland almost devoid of vegetation. I wanted to finish the training quickly, so I suggested running all the way to the labyrinth, but it was rejected by a single wave of Godfrey’s hand. It was most probably because he had focused on raising his strength stats and disregarded his dexterity. I could only give up and continue to tread through the endless wilderness.

We ran into monsters a couple of times. But when it came to this, I had no time to wait patiently for Godfrey’s orders, so I simply cut them down right away.

Eventually, after making it past a number of tall, rocky mountains, the gray limestone of the labyrinth finally came into view…

“Okay, we’re taking a break here!”

After Godfrey announced this in his gruff voice, the party stopped.

“…”

I wanted to just rush through the labyrinth; but since I figured it’d be overruled even if I brought it up, I simply sighed and sat down on a rock. It was already nearly midday.

“I’ll hand the food out.”

Godfrey then called up four leather pouches and threw them to the members. I caught mine with one hand and opened it without any expectations. Inside were a water bottle and some hard bread that were sold at NPC stores.

I opened the bottle and swallowed a mouthful while cursing my bad luck; I would be eating Asuna’s handmade sandwiches right now if everything had gone as we had planned.

Then, I suddenly noticed that Cradil was sitting on a distant rock. He hadn’t even touched his pouch, and those eyes beneath his long hair glanced darkly in our direction.

What on earth was he looking at…?

A cold feeling abruptly passed through my body. He was waiting for something. That something…it most probably-

I immediately threw the bottle away and tried to spit the liquid out of my mouth.

But it was too late. Strength suddenly left my body and I collapsed. The HP bar came up at the edge of my vision; it was surrounded by a green line that wasn't usually there.

There was no mistaking it; it was a paralysis poison.

When I looked around, I discovered that Godfrey and the other member were also writhing on the ground. I immediately reached inside my pouch with my left forearm, but this only intensified my panic. I had already handed all my antidote crystals and teleport crystals to Godfrey. I still had a potion, but it didn't have any effect on paralysis.

"Ku…kukuku…"

Shrill laughter reached my ears. As he sat on the rock, Cradil held his stomach with both hands and bent over in laughter. His heavily lidded eyes revealed the crazed ecstasy that I remembered all too well.

"Waha! Haha! Hyahahahaha!!"

He guffawed towards the skies, seemingly unable to control himself. Godfrey stared at him with a stupefied expression.

"What…what is this…? Wasn't the water…prepared by…you, Cradil…"

"Godfrey! Quick, use an antidote crystal!!"

After hearing my shout, Godfrey finally began to rummage through the pouch at his side.

"Hya-!!"

With a strange scream, Cradil jumped off his rock and kicked aside Godfrey's left hand with his boot. A green crystal rolled out of Godfrey's hand. Cradil picked it up, then stuck his hand in Godfrey's pouch, took out the remaining crystals, and put them into his own pouch.

Everything was over.

"Cradil…what, what are you doing…? Is this some sort of…training exercise?"

"Re-tard!!"

Cradil said as he kicked Godfrey, who still didn't understand the situation and muttered these stupid things, in the mouth.

"Argh!"

Godfrey's HP went down a little, and at the same time Cradil's cursor changed from yellow to the orange color of criminal status. But this didn't change anything. There was no way that someone would pass by on a floor that had already been cleared.

"Godfrey-san, I always thought you were an idiot, but I never imagined that you were this hopeless. Is even your brain made out of muscle?"

Cradil's sharp laughter echoed across the wastelands.

"There are still a lot of things that I want to say to you…but it wouldn't do to waste my time with appetizers…"

Cradil drew his two-handed sword as he spoke. He raised it high into the air and stretched out his thin body. Sunlight reflected off the thick blade as he waved it about.

"W-Wait, Cradil! You…what…what are you saying…isn't…isn't this training…?"

"Just shut up and die."

Cradil spat out and swung his sword down without mercy. A heavy and dull noise sounded, and Godfrey's HP greatly decreased.

Godfrey finally grasped the seriousness of the situation and started screaming. But it was already too late.

Twice, thrice, the sword came down with a merciless glint, and Godfrey's HP reduced noticeably with each swing. Then, when it reached the red area, Cradil stopped.

Just as I thought that he wouldn't commit murder no matter how crazy he was, Cradil reversed his grip on the sword and slowly pushed it into Godfrey. As Godfrey's HP went down bit by bit, Cradil began to press his entire weight against the sword.

"Aaaaaaaahhh!!"

"Hyahahahaha!!"

While Godfrey's wailing became louder, Cradil began mixing in a strange scream of his own. The sword dug into Godfrey's body slowly and his HP reduced at a steady pace-

While the other member and I watched silently, Cradil's sword penetrated completely through Godfrey, and his HP bar reached zero at the same time. Godfrey most probably didn't understand what was going on even as his body shattered into countless shards.

Cradil slowly pulled his sword out of the ground, then spun his head around like a clockwork doll and looked at the other member.

"Ah!! Ahhh!!"

With these short screams, the member flailed around in an attempt to escape. Cradil then started walking towards him in odd steps.

"…I have nothing against you…but according to my scenario, only I can return alive…"

He raised his sword while muttering to himself.

"Aaaahh!"

"You wanna hear~? You see, our party-"

He swung it down; his ears deaf to the member's screams.

"Was ambushed in the wilderness by a large group of PKers-."

Another swing.

"We fought bravely, but all three had died-."

And another.

"I was the only one remaining, but I drove back the criminals and managed to stay alive before returning to HQ-."

After the fourth attack, the member's HP vanished. A sound effect that sent shivers down my body resonated. But Cradil looked as if he had heard the voice of a goddess. He stood there, in the middle of the explosion of shards, and listened to it with a blissful expression on his face.

It wasn't his first time…

I was sure of this. His cursor may have turned to the orange color of criminals' only moments ago, but there were plenty of despicable ways to kill people without triggering it. However, understanding this fact now didn't solve anything.

Finally, Cradil turned to look my way, with an uncontrollable mirth spreading across his face. He slowly walked towards me, his sword making an unbearable noise as he dragged it along the ground.

"Hey."

He crouched down next to me, who was still sprawled on the ground, and said in a whisper.

"Because of an idiot like you, I had to kill two completely innocent people."

"You seem quite happy about it though."

I responded as I looked desperately for a way out of this situation. The only thing that moved was my mouth and my left arm. Because the paralysis condition kept one from opening the

menu window, it also forbade the player from sending any messages. Even though I knew it wouldn't do me much good, I struggled to move my left hand, which was inside Cradil's blind spot, while I continued to talk.

"Why did a person like you join the KoB? A criminal guild would have suited you better."

"Keh, why are you asking something so obvious? It's because of that girl."

He said this with his raspy voice and licked his lips. When I realized that he was talking about Asuna my blood began to boil.

"You damn bastard…!"

"Woah, why are you glaring at me like that? It's just a game isn't it…? Don't worry. I'll look after your precious sub-leader for you. After all, I have a lot of useful items."

Cradil picked up the poisoned water bottle and then shook it to produce some splashing sounds. Then he gave an awkward wink and kept talking.

"And you just said something very interesting, that a criminal guild would suit me more."

"…well, it's just the truth."

"I was complimenting you. You're pretty sharp."

Kekekeke.

Cradil seemed to be considering something as he laughed. Then, he suddenly unequipped the gauntlet on his left arm. He rolled up the white sleeves of his undershirt and turned his bare forearm so that I could see its underside.

"…!!"

When I saw what was there—my breath suddenly stopped. It was a tattoo. The image was a manga-like caricature of an ink-black coffin. A mouth and a pair of eyes formed a grin atop the coffin lid; the white bones of a skeletal arm reached out from inside.

"That…emblem is… «Laughing Coffin»?"

I asked in a dry voice. Cradil gave a smile and nodded in response.

«Laughing Coffin» used to be the biggest and worst PK guild in Aincrad. They were headed by a cold, sly leader and experimented endlessly with new methods of killing people; in the end, the number of players it had killed went into the triple digit figures.

The players once attempted to solve the issue through negotiations, but every messenger had been killed immediately. We couldn't even understand why they PKed, since it only lessened the chances of clearing the game, and because of this we couldn't talk with them properly. Not too long ago, the players who aimed to clear the game had formed a subjugation group

that rivaled the boss-killing groups, and finally destroyed their guild after several long and bloody battles.

Asuna and I were in the group too. But the information had leaked somewhere, and the PKers were prepared and waiting for us. In my frenzy to protect my comrades, I ended up taking the lives of two Laughing Coffin members by accident.

“Is this…for revenge? You’re a survivor from the Laughing Coffin?”

I asked with my cracking voice. Cradil virtually spat out his answer:

“Heh, no way. Why would I do something as stupid as that? I joined the Laughing Coffin only recently, and only in spirit anyways. I learned this paralysis technique from them…ah, that’s bothersome.”

He stood up with an almost machine-like movement and raised his sword up again.

“Well, we’ve talked for long enough. The poison should wear off soon, so I should finish this now. I’ve been dreaming of this moment…ever since that duel…”

Fire burned in his eyes, which were opened so wide they became circles. His smiling mouth had stuck its tongue out, and he even raised his heels to stand tiptoed as he prepared to swing his sword down.

Just before he moved, I tossed the throwing pick in my left hand using only my wrist. Although I aimed for the face where the damage was greatest, the accuracy penalty from paralysis caused the steel pick to miss and pierce into Cradil’s left arm. Cradil’s HP reduced by only a small amount, while I fell into a completely hopeless situation.

“…that hurt…”

Cradil wrinkled his brow and curved his lips upwards, then stabbed my right arm with the tip of his sword. He then twisted it twice, then thrice.

“Argh…!”

Although I didn’t feel any pain, an unpleasant feeling of being stimulated in the nerves passed through my entire body alongside the strong paralysis effect. Every time the blade dug into my arm, my HP decreased slowly but steadily.

Still there…? Was the poison’s effect still not going away…?”

I gritted my teeth and waited for the moment my body would be freed. The duration of paralysis differed based on the strength of the poison, but most paralyzing poisons wore off in five or so minutes.

Cradil pulled out his sword and then stabbed my left leg. The unpleasant feeling of being paralyzed rushed through my entire body once again, and the system calculated the damage mercilessly.

“Well…? How is it…? How does it feel to know that you’re going to die soon…? Tell me… would you…?”

Cradil said this in an almost whisper as he stared intently at my face.

“Say something squirt… Cry and scream that you don’t want to die…”

My HP fell below the halfway line and turned yellow. The paralysis still wasn’t gone yet. My whole body grew colder, as if death was enveloping me with freezing air, its chill slowly crawling up from my feet.

I had seen many players die in SAO. They all had the same expression on their faces as they shattered into countless fragments and disappeared; it was always the same simple expression of pondering, one that asked, "am I really going to just die like this?"

It was most probably because, deep within our hearts, none of us wanted to accept the absolute rule of the game. We simply didn't want to believe that death in the game meant an actual death.

We all held a hopeful speculation, that "maybe we'll just return to the real world when our HP reaches zero and we disappear." Of course, you had to personally die to find out what would actually happen. If you think about it like that, then death would be one of the ways to escape this game-.

“Hey, hey, say something. I’m really killing you here.”

Cradil pulled his sword out of my leg and stabbed my stomach this time. My HP decreased significantly and went into the red danger area. But it felt like this didn't concern me, as if it was all happening in another faraway world. Even as I was being tortured by the sword, my mind was embarking down a dark path, as if a heavy and thick cloth was gradually covering it.

But then—a strong fear suddenly clenched my heart.

Asuna. If I disappeared and left her in this world, Asuna would fall into Cradil’s hands and endure the same pain as me. That possibility formed an unbearable pain which shocked me back into consciousness.

“Kaaaah!!”

I opened my eyes, grabbed the sword that was buried in my stomach, and started pulling it out with all the strength I had. I had only about ten percent of my HP left. Cradil then shouted in surprise:

“Huh…huh? What’s this, you’re scared of dying?”

“Yeah…I…can't die yet…”

“Heh!! Hyahaha!! That’s more like it!!”

Cradil laughed like a freakish bird and put his weight behind the sword. I strained against it with one hand. The system performed a set of complicated calculations based on my and Cradil's strength and determined the result.

The final result—the sword started coming down again, slowly but steadily. I was filled with fear and despair.

Was this the end?

Was I going to die? Leaving Asuna in this insane world?

I resisted the gradually closing sword and the despair that reached out from within me.

“Die-!! Diiieeeee-!!”

Cradil screamed in a shrill voice.

The killing intent that took the form of a dully shining sword came down centimeter by centimeter. Then finally, the sword tip reached my body—and slowly dug in…

At this moment, a gust of wind blew.

It was a gust of deep red and pure white wind.

“Huh…!?”

With this exclamation of surprise, the murderer and his sword were thrown high into the air. I stared speechlessly at the silhouette of the person who had appeared.

“…I’m not late… I’m not late…thank you, God…I'm not late…”

Her trembling voice sounded sweeter than the flapping wings of an angel. Her lips trembled violently as she collapsed onto her knees and looked at me.

“Alive…you’re alive, right, Kirito-kun…?”

“…yeah…I’m still alive…”

My voice sounded so weak that it surprised me. Asuna nodded once and took out a pink crystal from her pouch, then put her left hand on my chest and shouted.

“Heal!”

The crystal broke and my HP bar filled up in an instant. After confirming my recovery, Asuna whispered to me:

“…wait here. I’ll take care of this quickly…”

Asuna then stood up, drew her rapier elegantly, and started walking.

Her target Cradil was still preparing to pick himself off the ground. When he saw the person that was walking towards him his eyes grew wide.

“A-Asuna-sama…h-how did you get here…? T-This, is, training, yes, there was an accident in the middle of training…”

Cradil bounced back up as if he had springs and attempted to form an excuse with his nervous voice. But before he could finish, Asuna's right hand flashed and the tip of her sword tore Cradil's mouth. She didn't become a criminal since her opponent already had an orange cursor.

“Ahh!!”

Cradil covered his mouth with his hand, leaned backwards, and froze for a moment. Then, as he righted himself, his eyes were full of a familiar anger.

“You bitch…that went way too far… Heh, well it’s fine. I’ll just take care of you as well…”

But he stopped mid-sentence; Asuna had started attacking fiercely as soon as she fixed her grip on her sword. Her rapier drew countless lines of light as it slashed and stabbed towards Cradil at unbelievable speeds. Even I couldn’t see the trajectory of her sword, and I was several levels above her. I just watched as the angel swung her sword almost as if she was dancing.

It was beautiful. Asuna pushed her opponent back expressionlessly, her long chestnut hair flowing while sparks of anger enveloped her entire body; it was indescribably beautiful.

“Ah!! Kaaaa!!”

Cradil had already begun panicking, his sword swung about wildly without even landing a scratch on Asuna. As his HP decreased noticeably from the yellow zone to the red danger area, Cradil finally threw his sword aside and screamed with both of his arms held up in the air.

“O-Okay!! Okay!! I’m sorry!!”

He then went to his knees and begged.

“I-I’ll leave the guild! I won’t appear in front of you two ever again!! So-”

Asuna silently listened to his cries.

She raised her sword slowly and reversed her grip. Her thin arm tensed with nervousness, and then went up another couple of centimeters as it prepared to stab through Cradil. At that moment the murderer screamed even more loudly.

“Heeeek! I-I don’t want to die-!!”

The sword stopped as if it hit an invisible wall. Her thin body began to shake violently.

I could fully feel Asuna's inner conflict, both her fear and her anger.

By what I knew, she had never killed anyone in this game. Since when a player is killed in this world they also die in the real world, PKing in this network game is equivalent to actual murder.

—Yeah. Stop, Asuna. You shouldn’t do that.

As I screamed this to myself, I also thought of the complete opposite at the same time.

—No, don’t hesitate. That’s what he’s after.

My prediction became reality 0.1 seconds later.

“Ahahahaha!”

I wasn't sure when Cradil had picked his sword back up, but he suddenly swung it upwards with a scream.

Asuna's rapier made a clanging sound and flew out of her right hand.

“Ah…!?”

As Asuna exclaimed and lost her balance, a metallic shine flashed above her head.

“Sub-leader, you're still faaaaaaaaaaarr too naive!!”

With a shriek filled with madness, Cradil swung his sword down without hesitation, drawing a dark red line of light.

“Ahhhhhhh!!”

This time, I was the one who had screamed. I kicked off from the ground with my right foot, which had just recovered from the paralysis, and flew a couple of meters before pushing Asuna aside with my right hand while blocking Cradil’s sword with my left.

Thump.

With this unpleasant sound, my left arm was severed from the elbow down. The body part loss icon flashed below the HP bar. While bloody red lines of light flowed from the cut on my left arm, my right hand straightened its fingers and-.

I stabbed my hand into the gap between Cradil’s thick armor. It glowed yellow as it buried itself deep within Cradil’s stomach.

I had successfully countered with the point-blank range skill «Embracer», which immediately eliminated the last twenty percent of Cradil's HP. His gaunt body shivered violently beside me, then completely lost all strength and sagged.

As his great sword fell onto the ground and clanged, he whispered into my ear:

“You…murderer…”

He sneered in a "kuku" sound.

Cradil's entire body shattered into numerous glass fragments. I was pushed back by the chill force of the dissipating polygons and fell backwards.

For a while, my exhausted, frozen mind registered only the sound of wind blowing.

Then I heard irregular footsteps stepping on the gravel. When I turned my gaze, I could see a fragile looking figure walking towards me with a hollow expression.

Asuna walked shakily towards me with her head lowered, and then collapsed to her knees in front of me like a puppet with its strings cut. Although she reached out towards me with her right hand, she suddenly pulled it back before it could reach me.

“…I’m sorry…because of me…it's all because of me…”

Asuna forced this out with a shaking voice and a grief-stricken expression. Tears rolled down from her large eyes and fell to the ground like sparkling gems. I barely managed to say something short with my dry throat:

“Asuna…”

“I’m sorry… I…won’t…meet Kirito-kun…a…again.”

I exerted myself to right my body back up, which was finally regaining its normal senses. My body was still filled with an unpleasant feeling because of the devastating damage I took, but I hugged Asuna with both my right arm and my crippled left arm. Then, I covered her beautiful, cherry-colored lips with mine.

“…!”

Asuna went rigid and tried to push me away, but I held her small body tightly with all the strength I had. It was without a doubt something that went against the manner violation prevention code. Right now a system message should have appeared in front of Asuna, and if she pressed OK, I would be immediately teleported to the prison area of the Black Iron Castle.

But my arms showed no signs of loosening up. As I left Asuna's lips, I passed her cheeks before burying my face in the curve of her neck. Then I whispered:

“My life belongs to you, Asuna. So I’ll use it for you. I’ll stay with you until the end.”

I pulled Asuna in closer with the left arm that had the body part loss status imposed on it for three minutes. Asuna took a trembling breath and then whispered in response:

“…I-I’ll protect you as well. I’ll protect you forever. So…”

She wasn’t able to continue talking. So I listened to Asuna's sobbing with our arms held tightly around each other.

The warmth of our bodies began to melt my frozen heart bit by bit.

Chapter 16

Asuna told me that she had been monitoring the map while waiting for me in Grandum.

The moment Godfrey's signal disappeared, she ran out of the city and had crossed the five kilometers that took us an hour to cover in just five minutes. When I pointed out that it was a figure which exceeded the dexterity stat limits, she answered with a slight smile:

"It's the power of love."

After we returned to the guild HQ, we told Heathcliff what happened and asked him if we could temporarily leave the guild. When Asuna explained her reason as "distrust of the guild," Heathcliff thought in silence for a while, but gave us permission nevertheless. Then, he said one last thing with a mysterious smile on his face:

"But you'll return to the battlefield soon enough."

By the time we left the HQ, it was already evening. We held each others' hands and walked together to the teleport gate plaza.

Neither of us said a word.

As we walked amongst the black shadows of the iron towers and the orange light that came from outside the floating castle, I wondered just where Cradil's hate had come from.

There were quite a number of people who enjoyed committing crimes in this world. From thieves and robbers to the cold-blooded murderers of «Laughing Coffin» like Cradil; rumors claim that the number of criminal players already exceeded a thousand. People thought of them as natural occurrences like monsters now.

But when I thought about it, I still felt that they were a very strange group. It should be obvious to everyone that harming other players was an act that would undoubtedly hurt the chances of clearing the game. In other words, it meant that they didn't want to leave this game.

Yet after meeting Cradil, I didn't think this applied to him. He didn't help or obstruct the clearing of the game; he had merely stopped thinking. Neither reminiscing the past nor looking forward to the future, he simply tried to fulfill his endless desires, which resulted in the growth of his vile intentions—

Then what about me? I couldn't confidently say that I was seriously focused on clearing the game. It would be more accurate to claim that I habitually explored labyrinths only for experience points. If I fought only to strengthen myself, to feel the pleasure of superiority, then somewhere deep down within myself, did I also not want this world to end—?

Suddenly, it felt as if the iron plate beneath my feet had begun to sink. I stopped walking and tightened my grip on Asuna's right hand, which I had been hanging onto.

"…?"

Asuna tilted her head and looked at me. I lowered my head and spoke as if I was talking to myself:

“…no matter what happens…I'll make sure that you…return to that world…”

“…”

This time Asuna tightened her grip.

“When the time comes, we'll go back together.”

She revealed a smile as she finished.

We had arrived at the teleport gate plaza without realizing it. Only a few players were walking about in the area, huddling against the cold wind that foretold the coming of winter.

I turned to look directly at Asuna.

I thought that the warmth which radiated from her strong will was the only light that guided me towards the right direction.

"Asuna...tonight...I want to be with you..."

I said this without thinking.

I didn't want to be away from her. The close encounter had induced a terrifying fear of death that I had never felt before, one that couldn't be shaken off even now.

I would definitely have nightmares if I slept alone tonight. I would dream of that person's insanity, his sword digging into me, and the feeling of stabbing my right hand into him; I was sure of it.

Asuna stared at me with wide eyes, as if she understood the reason behind my request—

Then, with her cheeks blushing red, she nodded slightly.

Asuna’s house in Salemburg, which I was visiting for the second time, was still luxuriously decorated; yet this time it greeted me with a comfortable warmness. The objects that were distributed around the place displayed the owner's outstanding taste. But despite this, Asuna said:

“U-Uwa— it’s so messy here. I haven't been back here much these days and…”

With a "hehe" laugh, she smiled sheepishly and quickly cleaned up the scattered items.

“I'll make dinner quickly. Just read the paper or something and wait.”

“Ah, okay.”

I sank into the sofa after watching Asuna remove her battle gear, put on an apron, and disappear into the kitchen. Then I picked up the large newspaper that was on the table. Although we call it a newspaper, it's merely a collection of rumors from those players who traded information. But since this world lacked forms of entertainment, the newspaper became a precious source of media with many subscribers. The paper only had four pages, and I only glanced casually at the first page before tossing it aside out of irritation. This was because the title page headline was the duel between Heathcliff and me.

[New skill Dual Blades user crushed by Holy Sword]

Beneath the headline was a picture of me sprawled out on the ground before Heathcliff, taken through the use of Record Crystals. One could say that I had only added another page to the undefeated legend of Heathcliff.

Well, maybe they would stop bothering me as much if their expectations of my skill drops... I helped myself find an easily acceptable excuse. Then, as I started to look through my inventory list, an enticing aroma wafted out of the kitchen.

The dinner entrée was a steak made out of a cow-like monster's meat and served with Asuna's special soy sauce. Although the ingredients' rank wasn't that high, the flavoring was simply perfect. Asuna watched me with a wide smile as I stuffed the meat into my mouth.

As we sat across from each other on the sofa and drank tea after finishing dinner, Asuna became quite talkative for some reason. She spoke endlessly about topics like which brand of weapons she liked and which floors had famous sightseeing locations.

At first I listened to her with surprise, but then Asuna suddenly fell silent, which caused me to get worried. She sat absolutely still and stared at her teacup as if she was trying to find something. Her expression was extremely serious, almost as if she was preparing for a fight.

“…hey, what's wrong...”

But before I could finish speaking, Asuna clanked her teacup loudly onto the table, then shot up from her seat and announced:

“...okay!”

She walked over to the window sill, touched the wall to open the Room Control Menu, and suddenly turned off all the lights. Darkness covered the room immediately; my scan skill's support ability automatically kicked in and replaced my normal sight with night-vision mode.

The room was dyed in a dim blue light, and Asuna was shining white from the lampposts' light which came in from the windows. Although I was confused by her behavior, her beauty still caused me to hold my breath.

Her long hair that seemed dark blue, her slender, white arms and legs that stretched out from under her tunic, they all reflected the weak light and looked like they were glowing.

Asuna silently stood by the window sill for a while. I couldn't see her expression very well because she had lowered her head. She also held her right hand against her chest and seemed to be hesitating about something.

Just as I was about to ask what was going on, Asuna began to move her left hand. Her thumb and forefinger moved through the air, and a menu window appeared with an accompanying sound effect.

In the blue-tinted darkness, Asuna's fingers moved across the glowing purple menu window. It appeared that she was manipulating the left menu, which controlled the player's equipment.

As soon as I thought that, the knee-high stockings that Asuna was wearing disappeared, and the elegant curves of her legs were laid bare before my eyes. Her fingers moved again, and this time her short, one-piece robe was taken off. I couldn't help but open my mouth wide and bulged my eyes until they were round; my mind had fallen into a complete stop.

Asuna was now wearing only her underwear. Small white cloths which barely managed to cover her chest and waist.

“D-Don't look…this way….”

She said, her small voice trembling. But even though she said this, I still couldn't shift my eyes away.

Asuna tried to cover her chest with her hands as she wavered; but after she raised her head and looked straight at me, she lowered her arms gracefully.

I received a shock that felt as if my soul had left my body and could only watch her with a blank expression.

"Beautiful" didn't even begin to describe her. Her skin that was tinged with blue light particles was soft and sleek. Her hair seemed as if it was made from the finest silk. Her breasts curved so perfectly that it appeared, ironically, as if no graphic engine in existence could generate it. The curvature of her legs that started at her slim waist made one think of the gracefulness of a wild animal.

It was impossible to believe that her appearance was only a 3D rendered image. If I were to describe it, it was like a sculpture made by God with life blown into it.

The data collected by the Nerve Gear from the calibration step of player registration determined the body tone of the players' avatars. With that in mind, one would call the existence of such a perfect body a miracle.

I kept staring at her almost bare body as if my soul had left my body. If Asuna hadn't covered herself with both arms and opened her mouth to speak, I would have kept standing like that even an hour later.

Asuna's face was so red that I could tell even in the blue-tinted darkness of the room. She lowered her head and spoke:

“K-Kirito-kun, take your clothes off too…. It's em, embarrassing for me to be like this by myself.”

After hearing that, I finally realized the meaning behind Asuna's actions.

In other words, she took what I said — that I wanted to spend the night with her, in a deeper sense than what I meant.

As soon as I understood that, I also fell into an endlessly deep panic. As a result, I committed the worst mistake in my whole life up until now.

“Err…no, you see, I just thought...that it would be good, if we stayed to– together in a room tonight…”

“Eh…?”

As I responded stupidly with my honest thoughts, it was Asuna who froze with her mouth wide open this time. Then, an expression of intense anger and embarrassment spread across her face.

“You…you...”

Her clenched right fist revealed an almost visible killing intent.

“Idiot—!!”

Asuna's fist, which had accelerated to a speed that utilized all of her dexterity stats, was stopped just barely before striking my face by the Crime Prevention Code and released a loud noise and a spray of purple sparks instead.

“A-Ahh—! Wait!! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Forget what I said!”

I tried to explain while frantically waving my hands about to Asuna, who was about to throw her second punch without paying any attention to me.

“I'm sorry, I was wrong!! Bu… but, anyway, can you…like…actually d-do it…? In SAO…?”

Asuna dropped her attacking stance and was a bit taken aback, although still furious. Then she asked:

“You, you mean you don't know…?”

“No, I don't…”

Then, Asuna's expression changed suddenly from one of anger to one of embarrassment, before she explained in a small voice:

“…so…in the options menu, all the way on the bottom…there's an option called «Ethic Code Off».”

It was the first time I had ever heard of such a thing. I'm sure this wasn't available during the beta test, nor was it mentioned in the manual. To think that this was another price that I had to pay for playing as a solo player and not having any interest except fighting.

But this information raised a new question that I couldn't help but think about. Since I still hadn't fully recovered my ability to think straight, I unintentionally said it out loud:

“…have…have you ever done it before…?”

Once again, Asuna's iron fist erupted in sparks right before my face.

"O-Of course not, you idiot—!! I just heard about it from the other girls in the guild!!"

I hurried to kneel down on the ground before her and apologized endlessly. It took several minutes before I finally managed to calm her down.

A single candle atop of the table stayed burning; its thin rays of light made Asuna's skin glow faintly as she slept in my arms. I ran a finger gently down her white back; the warm and smooth feeling that traveled up from my fingertips was absolutely intoxicating.

Asuna slowly opened her eyes and looked towards me. She blinked twice and then smiled.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah. I had a strange dream. One about the real world…”

She continued to smile as she rubbed her face against my chest.

“Within the dream, I had wondered if entering Aincrad and meeting you had all been a dream, and I was really afraid. It's a relief...that it wasn't all a dream."

“You're a real strange one. Don't you want to go back?”

“Of course I want to. I want to go back, but I don't want everything that had happened here to disappear. Although...it took us a while...but these two years are precious to me. I'm sure of that now.”

Asuna suddenly switched to a serious expression and grabbed my right hand, which I had placed on her shoulder, then brought it to her chest and hugged it tightly.

“...I'm really sorry, Kirito-kun. I should... I should have resolved it myself...”

I breathed in and then exhaled deeply.

“No...Cradil's target, the person who made him that way, was me. It was my fight.”

I nodded slowly while looking into Asuna's eyes.

Tears formed in her hazelnut eyes as Asuna silently pressed her lips against the hand she was holding. I could feel their soft movement.

“I'll also...bear it with you. Every burden that you have, I'll carry them with you. I promise. I'll definitely protect you from now on...”

This was—

The line that I couldn't say even once up until now. Yet in this moment, my lips trembled, and I could hear the sounds unveiling themselves from my throat, from my very soul.

“Me too.”

A very thin voice reverberated across the air.

“I'll protect you too.”

Although these were simple words, I had said them in such a pathetically quiet and unreliable manner. I smiled bitterly as I held up Asuna's hand and said:

“Asuna...you really are strong. You're far stronger than me..."

After hearing that, Asuna blinked several times and then smiled.

"No, I'm not. I usually hide behind other people in the real world. Even this game wasn't something that I bought."

She laughed as if she had just thought of something.

“It was something that my older brother bought, but he had to suddenly leave for business; so I got to play with it on the game's opening day. He was really disappointed about that. He must be really angry now that I've occupied it for two years.”

I thought that Asuna was even unluckier to have come here in his stead, but I just nodded.

“...you'd better get back quickly and apologize.”

“Yeah... I'll have to try harder...”

But Asuna trailed off weakly as she said this, casting her eyes downward as if she was afraid of something and then moving her entire body closer to me.

“Umm...Kirito-kun, I know this is contradicting what I just said...but can we leave the front lines for a bit?”

“Hmm...?”

“I'm scared somehow… We finally managed to convey our feelings, so I feel like something bad will happen again if we go to the front lines straight away… Maybe I'm just a little tired.”

I brushed Asuna's hair back silently and nodded so meekly that I surprised even myself.

“Yeah, you're right... I'm, a bit tired too...”

Even if the numbers didn't change, the battles that we fought day after day accumulated plenty of fatigue that couldn't be seen. That's especially the case for situations as extreme as today's. Even a strong bow will break if one pulled on it excessively. We definitely needed a break.

I felt the impulse that drove me to fight relentlessly drift further away. Right now, I only wanted to deepen the bond between the two of us.

I wrapped my arms around Asuna, then buried my face in her silky hair and spoke:

"On the northwestern part of the twenty-second floor, amongst the forests and lakes...there's a small village. It's a good place with no monsters. They sell a few cottages there. The two of us can move there together...and then... "

Asuna looked at me as I stopped talking.

“Then...?”

I managed to move my frozen tongue and kept talking.

"...let's, let's get married."

The perfect smile that Asuna showed me that moment, I would never forget it for the rest of my life.

“Okay...”

She nodded slightly as a large teardrop ran down her red cheeks.

Chapter 17

There were four types of relationships that two players could have within the SAO system.

First was two people who didn't really know each other. The second was friends. People who had listed each other as friends could send short messages to each other no matter where they were. They could also search for each other's locations by map.

The third was guild comrades. Apart from the above benefits, they also gained a slight increase in their stats when they partied with members of the same guild. However, they had to give up a bit of the Coll they earned as a sort of tax to the guild.

Up until now, Asuna and I were friends and members of the same guild, despite the fact that we were taking a break from the guild. But we had decided to enter the last type of relationship.

Marriage— although getting married was very simple. Once one person sent the proposal message and the other person accepted it, then they were married. But the difference between marriage and friends or guild members was incomparably different.

Marriage in SAO meant the sharing of all information and items. One could see the other's stat window at will, and even their inventory windows had fused into one. In others words, it was entrusting one's most important safety nets to their partners. In Aincrad, where betrayals and fraud were common, few went as far as marriage even amongst the closest couples. Of course, another important reason was because of the extremely unbalanced male-female ratio.

The twenty-second floor was one of the most sparsely populated areas in Aincrad. Since it was one of the lower floors, it was especially large; but most of it was taken up by the forests and the numerous lakes that were scattered around the area; therefore, the living area was so small that it could be called a hamlet. Monsters seldom appeared on the field, and since the difficulty level of the labyrinth was exceptionally low, the level was cleared in three days and most players didn't remember much of it.

Asuna and I decided to buy a small, round cottage within the woods on the twenty-second floor to live in. Even though it was small, it still cost a considerable amount of money to buy a house within SAO. Asuna offered to sell her house in Salemburg, but I was strongly against it, because selling such a perfectly furnished house would be far too regrettable. So in the end, we gathered all of our rare items and sold them with the help of Egil, which managed to provide just enough money to buy the house.

Although Egil said with a sad expression that we could use the second floor of his shop if we wanted, I thought that spending a newly-wed life within a merchant shop was far too tragic. Furthermore, I didn't even want to imagine what would happen once the fact that the all-famous Asuna had gotten married became known. I thought that we should be able to spend our days peacefully on the sparsely populated twenty-second floor.

“Uwa— what a beautiful view!”

Asuna leaned forward, out of the window in our bedroom; although it was called the bedroom, there were only two rooms in the entire house.

The scenery outside really was breathtaking. This was near the edge of Aincrad, so one could see the glittering lakes, the green forest, and the wide-open skies all at once. Because we usually lived with a stone ceiling about one hundred meters above us, the open skies gave us an inexplicable feeling of freedom.

“Just don't fall off while you're looking at the scenery.”

I stopped organizing the household items and wrapped my arms around Asuna. This woman was now my wife— as I thought that, the warmth of bright sunlight in the winter, the marvelous feeling of wonder, as well as the surprise of how far we had gone all rushed me at once.

Until I became trapped in this game, I was just a kid who went to school and then back home without any goal in life. But now, the real world had become a faraway past.

If— if this game was cleared, we would be able to return to the real world...that was what all the players, including Asuna and I, wished for. But I couldn't help feeling anxious whenever I thought about it. I unconsciously began to apply strength to my arms that were around Asuna.

“It hurts, Kirito-kun... Is something wrong...?”

“S-Sorry... Hey, Asuna...”

For a moment I stopped talking, but I had to finish asking.

“...our relationship, is it only in-game...? Is it going to disappear once we return to the other world…?”

“I'm going to be angry, Kirito-kun.”

Asuna turned around and looked at me with her eyes full of emotion.

“Even if this was just a normal game rather than this strange situation, I still wouldn't like another person so casually.”

She squeezed my cheeks with both her hands, and then said:

"I learned something here, and that was to keep trying and never give up. If we make it back to the real world, I'll definitely come find Kirito-kun again, and I'll still like you."

How many times have I marveled at Asuna's honest and strong heart? Or maybe mine was just too weak.

But even if I was the weak one, it was still all right. I had forgotten for such a long time how comfortable it was to depend on someone else and have them depend on me. I didn't know

how long we would be able to stay here, but at least we were away from the battlefield during this period of time—

I let my thoughts wander and concentrated my feelings on the softness and the sweet smell that filled my arms.

Chapter 18

The float attached to the fishing line hadn't moved even once. Drowsiness invaded my consciousness as I watched the dancing sunlight reflected off the sparkling water ripples of the lake.

I made a huge yawn and pulled up the fishing line. Only an empty silver hook on the end shined in the light; the bait that I had put on it was gone.

Over ten days had passed since we moved to the twenty-second floor. In order to gather food each day, I had erased my two-handed sword skill, which I trained briefly in a long time ago, and exchanged it for the fishing skill. I began to imitate Taikoubou [1] in fishing. But for some reason, I just couldn't catch anything. The training score had just passed 600, so I didn't expect any big catches, but I thought that I should have at least caught something by now. Instead, I simply spent day after day wasting the cases of bait that I bought in the village.

"Gah, this is so annoying…"

I muttered my complaints, tossed the fishing tackle aside, and then threw myself onto the ground. The wind that rushed over the water was icy cold, but the overcoat that Asuna had made me with her sewing skills kept me warm. Asuna was still in the middle of training that skill, thus the coat wasn't as good as clothing from the NPC stores. But since it was useable and kept me warm, there weren't any problems.

It was now «The month of the Cypress» in Aincrad, which meant it was November back in Japan. Although it was almost winter, fishing in SAO didn't have anything to do with seasons. Maybe it was simply because I had used up all my luck on getting my beautiful wife.

As my thoughts reached this, my entire being was filled with happiness, and a wide smile spread across my face. Then suddenly, a voice reached my ears.

"How did you do?"

I leapt up in surprise and saw a man standing there as I turned around.

He was wrapped in thick clothing, including a hat with ear flaps, and had fishing tackle in his hands just like me. But the surprising part was his age. No matter how I looked at it, he seemed at least fifty years old. The eyes behind metal framed glasses showed the age of a senior. Amongst the hardcore game addicts of SAO, it was extremely rare to see someone so old. Actually, I had never even seen one before. Maybe-?

“I’m not a NPC.”

He smiled bitterly as if he had read my thoughts, and then slowly descended down the slope.

“S-Sorry. I was just wondering…”

“No, it’s fine. It’s understandable. I’m most probably the oldest player here.”

His healthy body rocked as he gave a hearty "wa-ha-ha" laugh.

“Excuse me.”

He said as he sat down next to me. He took out a bait case from his hip, then awkwardly opened a pop-up menu, retrieved his fishing rod, and put the bait on it.

“My name is Nishida. I’m a fisherman here. In Japan, I worked as the head of maintenance for a company called the Tohto Broadband Connection. I’m sorry but I don’t have my business cards with me.”

He laughed again.

“Ah…”

I could mostly guess the reason for why he was in this game. Tohto was a network operator company that had been cooperating with Argas. They were responsible for taking care of the network that linked to the SAO servers.

“I’m Kirito. I moved here from the upper levels a while ago. Nishida oji-san…must have been…maintaining the SAO network connection…?”

“I was in charge of it.”

Nishida said as he nodded. I looked at him with a complicated feeling. This meant that the man had become entangled in everything here because of his job.

"Haha, my superiors said there was no need to log on, but I can't be fully at ease until I see my work with my own eyes, and because of an old man's worries, I became like this."

He swung his rod with an amazingly smooth motion as he said this, and one could tell that he had the professional mastery of a skilled fisherman. He also seemed to like talking, as he kept on going without waiting for a response from me:

"Other than me, there are around twenty to thirty other old men who ended up here due to various reasons. Most of them are living safely in Starting City, but I enjoy this far more than simply eating three meals a day."

He lifted his fishing rod a little.

"I searched endlessly for good rivers and lakes, and finally came up all the way to a place like this."

“Oh, really… Well, there are almost no monsters on this floor.”

Nishida just smiled at what I said without answering. Then he asked me:

“Well, are there any good spots on the upper floors?”

He asked.

“Hmmm… Well, the sixty-first floor was entirely a lake, well, more like a sea, and they say one could catch huge fish there.”

“Ohh! I better go there sometime.”

At this time, the float of his fishing rod began to quickly sink. Nishida wasted no time in pulling it in. It seemed that his fishing skill level was pretty high, as well as his actual ability to fish.

“Woah, it’s huge!”

As I strained to lean forward, Nishida calmly reeled in the fishing line and quickly pulled up the shimmering blue fish. The fish flapped in his hands a few times and then vanished into his inventory.

“Amazing…!”

Nishida gave an embarrassed smile as he raised his head to reply:

“It’s nothing. All you need to do here is raise your fishing skill.”

Then he added while scratching his head:

“But, even if I can catch them, I still didn't know how to cook them properly… I wanted to eat sashimi or grilled fish, but I can’t do anything without soy sauce.”

“Ah…yeah…”

I hesitated for a moment. We had moved here to avoid other people, but I figured that this person wouldn't really be interested in rumors and gossips.

“…I know of something that tasted a lot like soy sauce…”

“What!?”

Nishida leaned closer with his eyes shining behind his glasses.

As Asuna greeted my return and saw Nishida, her eyes went wide with surprise, but then she smiled and said:

“Welcome back. A guest?”

“Yeah, this is Nishida oji-san, a fisherman. And-”

My voice trailed off as I turned towards Nishida and was unsure of how to introduce Asuna. Then, Asuna smiled at the old fisherman and introduced herself:

“I’m his wife, Asuna. Welcome to our home.”

She nodded confidently.

Nishida was staring at Asuna with his mouth open. Asuna was dressed in a plain long skirt, a hemp shirt with an apron, and a headscarf on top. She looked very different from the imposing warrior image of her as a KoB member, but her beauty didn’t change.

After blinking several times, Nishida finally came to his senses and said:

“Ah, ahh, I apologize. I was mesmerized for a moment. I’m Nishida. Sorry for intruding upon you like this…”

He scratched his head and laughed.

Asuna applied all of her impressive cooking skills on the huge fish that Nishida had caught, and brought it onto the table after turning it into sashimi and grilled fish with soy sauce as a seasoning. As the aroma of the handmade soy sauce wafted through the house, Nishida widened his nostrils with a look of delight on his face.

It tasted more like a yellowtail with just the right amount of oil rather than a freshwater fish. According to Nishida, you needed to have at least 950 points in fishing to be able to catch it. After a brief conversation, the three of us focused on eating with our chopsticks.

The plates were empty within the blink of an eye, and Nishida sighed with an expression of bliss as he held a cup of hot tea in his hands.

“…ah, that was very satisfying. Thank you. To think that soy sauce actually exists in this world…”

“Oh, it’s handmade. You can take some back with you if you like it.”

Asuna retrieved a small bottle from the kitchen and handed it over to Nishida. I thought that it was a good idea not to tell him the recipe. Asuna then smiled and said to the grateful Nishida:

"Don't worry about it; you also brought us such a good fish."

She then continued:

“Kirito-kun never caught anything.”

At this sudden attack, I simply sipped on my tea in silence before responding:

“The lakes in this area are all too hard.”

“No, not really. It’s only the lake that Kirito-san was fishing in.”

“Eh…”

What Nishida said made me fall speechless. Asuna grabbed her stomach and began to laugh without stop.

“Why did they set it like that…?”

“Well actually, in that lake…”

Nishida lowered his voice before continuing, so Asuna and I leaned forward.

“I think the local god lives there.”

“Local god?”

As Asuna and I echoed each other, Nishida smiled, pushed back his glasses, and then kept talking:

“In the village item shop, there is one bait that’s much more expensive than the others. I was curious about its capabilities, so I decided to buy it once to try out.”

I swallowed instinctively.

“But I couldn't catch anything with that bait. After trying it out in various locations, I finally thought of taking a shot at that high-difficulty lake.”

“Did, did you catch something…?”

“Well, something took the bait.”

Nishida nodded deeply, and then his expression became one of regret:

“But I couldn't pull it out with my strength and ended up losing my fishing rod to it. I only managed to see its shadow during the last moments. It wasn't just huge; one could call it a monster, but in a different sense from the ones that appeared in the fields.”

He spread his arms wide apart. This was probably the reason behind his meaningful smile when I said, "There are almost no monsters on this floor."

“Uwa, I want to see it!”

Asuna exclaimed as her eyes sparkled. Then, Nishida caught my gaze and said:

“So I have a proposal—do you have confidence in your strength stats Kirito-san…?”

“Well, it should be alright…”

“Then how about we fish for it together?! I’ll hold it until it bites and then leave the rest to you.”

“Hmm, so we’ll «Switch» while fishing…would that be possible…?”

I tilted my head to the side.

“Let’s try it, Kirito-kun! It sounds interesting!”

Asuna said this with "excitement" written all over her face. But, it was true that I was also quite interested.

“Then let's have a go at it.”

As I answered, a smile spread across Nishida’s face.

"That's the spirit, wa-ha-ha."

That night.

After exclaiming, "Coldcold," Asuna crawled into the bed, then pushed her body against mine and made a sound of satisfaction. She blinked sleepily and then smiled as if she had just thought of something.

“…there’re so many different people here.”

“He was interesting, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

Asuna then suddenly removed her smile and muttered:

“Up until now, I had only fought on the upper floors. I had completely forgotten that there were people who lived normal lives…”

“I don’t mean that we’re special; but since we’re on a high enough level to fight on the front lines, I suppose it also means that we have an obligation to them.”

“…I had never thought about it like that… I always felt that becoming stronger was just a way to survive.”

“I think that a lot of people are going to be counting on you from now on. Of course, that includes me.”

“…except with my personality, hearing these kind of expectations only makes me want to run away.”

“Oh you.”

As Asuna pouted in dissatisfaction, I stroked her hair and hoped for this life to continue for a while longer. For Nishida and the other players, we have to return to the front lines at some point. But at least for now-

Based on the messages that Egil and Cline had sent me, I knew that they were having a hard time trying to clear the seventy-fifth floor. However, I believed from the bottom of my heart, that the most important thing to me right now was this life with Asuna.

Chapter 19

Three days later, Nishida informed us in the morning that he was going to fish for the local god. Around thirty people would be there to watch, as it seemed that he had told his fishermen friends about this.

"This is troublesome. Asuna...what should we do?"

"Hm~mmm..."

To tell the truth, we weren't all that happy about this. We had come here to hide from the gossipers and Asuna's fans, so we were a little hesitant about appearing before so many people.

"How about this?!"

Asuna gathered her hair and pushed it up. Then she covered her face up to her eyes with a huge scarf. She didn't stop there and pressed some buttons on her menu window to put on a plain overcoat.

"Y-Yeah. Pretty good. You look like a proper farmer's wife."

"...is that, a compliment?"

"Of course. In my case, they're not going to recognize me as long as I don't equip battle gear."

Before the sun even rose, I walked out of the house with Asuna, who was carrying our picnic basket. She could have just called it out when we got there, but she insisted that it was part of the disguise.

Today was warm for an early winter day. After walking through the forest of huge pine trees for a while, we could finally see the sparkling water between the trunks. A lot of people had already gathered there. As I approached nervously, a familiar stout figure waved to us as he laughed.

"Wa-ha-ha, it's a relief that we have such great weather today!"

"Hello, Nishida oji-san."

Asuna and I nodded our heads. He told us that the assembly of people here from various age groups were all members of a fishing guild that Nishida ran. We greeted everyone nervously, but it seemed nobody recognized Asuna.

Putting that aside, Nishida oji-san was far more active than I imagined. He must have been a good team leader within his company. The atmosphere was already spirited, as the group had been holding a fishing competition before our arrival.

"Eh~ so, today's main event will finally be starting!"

Nishida loudly announced this as he walked towards us with a long fishing rod in his hand, and the spectators cheered in excitement. I looked at the fishing rod he was carrying, my eyes tracing down the pole without much thought before the item at its end surprised me.

It was a lizard, an abnormally large one at that. It was as long as an adult's forearm. Its poisonous-looking red and black skin shone as if to emphasize its freshness.

"Hiiiii—"

Asuna noticed it even later than I did, and her expression froze as she took several steps back from it. If this was the bait, then what we were trying to catch must be unbelievable.

But before I had any time to ask, Nishida turned towards the lake and raised his fishing rod. With a short shout, he swung it in an impressive form, and the huge lizard drew an arc in midair before falling into the water with a large splash.

Fishing required almost no waiting time within SAO. Once you put the bait in the water, either a fish took the bite within a few dozen seconds, or you lost the bait. We swallowed involuntarily as we watched as the line sank into the water.

After just a few moments, the fishing rod twitched several times. But Nishida didn't even move an inch.

"It's, it's here Nishida-san!"

"It's still too early!"

Behind Nishida's glasses, the two eyes that usually belonged to a good-natured grandfather were shining with light. Nishida continued to watch the end of the rod without moving as it twitched.

Then the rod jerked harder.

"Now!"

Nishida strained his small body backwards and pulled the rod using his whole body. I could tell the rope was really tight just by looking at it, which also gave off a twanging sound effect.

"It took the bait!! I'll entrust the rest to you!!"

I cautiously pulled the rod that Nishida had handed over, but it didn't even budge one bit. It felt as if the fish hook had caught onto something embedded into the ground. I looked back at Nishida, worried if the fish had really bitten, and then within the blink of an eye—

The rope started pulling into the water with a burst of power.

"Ahhh!"

I quickly dug my feet into the ground and pulled it up again. The strength-applied gauge quickly went past the normal mode.

"I-Is it okay to strain this?"

I asked Nishida as I worried about the durability of the fishing pole.

"It's of the highest quality! You can pull on it all you want!"

Nishida nodded, his face already red from excitement. I corrected my grip on the rod and then pulled with all my strength. The fishing rod bent around the middle and became a huge U.

As each player levels up, they can choose to raise either strength or dexterity. Axe-users such as Egil would opt for strength, while rapier-users like Asuna would focus on their dexterity. Although I was a normal sword user and raised both of them, my personal preferences prioritized dexterity somewhat more than strength.

But I seemed to be winning this tug of war, most probably because my level itself was so high. I slowly stepped backwards, steadily forcing the huge thing out of the water.

"Ah, I can see it!!"

Asuna leaned over the water and pointed to it. I was leaning backwards and further away from the lake so I couldn't check. The spectators got louder and rushed forward to look into the water, which quickly deepened as it left the shore. I couldn't suppress my curiosity and focused all of my strength to tug at the fishing rod.

"...?"

Suddenly, something startled all the spectators that had been leaning over the water. Each one of them took a few steps back.

"What's wrong...?"

Before I even finished talking, they all turned around and ran away. Even Asuna and Nishida ran past me from either side with white faces. I was about to look back towards them when—the weight lifted from my hands and I fell down on my backside.

Ah, did the rope snap!?

As I thought that, I threw the rod away and ran towards the lake. At that moment, the glittering water surface of the lake suddenly surged upwards.

"Eh-!?"

I froze on the spot with my eyes wide open, and at this moment I heard Asuna's faraway voice:

"Kirito-ku——n, it's dangerous——!!!"

When I turned around, I saw Asuna, Nishida, and everyone else had already gotten up the embankment that rose from the edge of the lake, which was quite far away from me. I could hear the water splashing loudly behind me as I finally began to understand the situation. Then, with a feeling of uneasiness, I turned back around.

The fish was standing.

To be more precise, the creature was like a Coelacanth [2], a cross between fish and reptiles, except this one leaned more towards the reptile side. It stood there on the grass with its six powerful legs and looked down upon me as water streamed off it like waterfalls.

I said "looked down" because this thing was at least two meters tall. Its mouth, which seemed like it could swallow a cow whole, was positioned just a bit higher than my head with a familiar looking lizard leg sticking out of it.

From either side of this ancient colossal fish's head, two basketball-sized eyes met with those of my own. A yellow cursor appeared automatically to mark it as a monster.

Nishida had told us that the local god of this lake was a monster in a different sense from those that appeared in the fields.

How was it different? This thing was a monster in every sense of the word.

I forced a smile and took a couple of steps backwards. Then I turned around and scrambled off. The huge fish behind me gave a thunderous roar and then started following me with steps that shook the ground.

I pushed my dexterity stats to the limit and ran as if I was flying. I reached Asuna within a few seconds and complained loudly:

"Th-Th-That was unfair! Running away by yourself!!"

"Uwa, thisisn'tthetimetobesayingthatKirito-kun!"

I turned around and saw the huge fish running towards us with an impressive speed despite its sheer size.

"Ooh, it's running on the ground... So it's a dipnoan[3]...?"

"Kirito-san, this isn't the time to be saying pointless things like that!! We should run away quickly!!"

This time it was Nishida who shouted in fear. The dozens of spectators were in a state of shock from the situation, and quite a few of them were sitting on the ground with blank expressions.

"Kirito-kun, did you bring your weapons?"

Asuna said as she brought her head right next to mine. Yeah, it would be pretty hard to get everybody ordered enough to escape in this sort of situation—

"Sorry, I didn't..."

"Oh well, I don't have any choice then..."

Asuna shook her head as she turned to face the huge fish that was nearing us. She quickly manipulated the menu with a sure hand.

As Nishida and the other spectators watched with surprise, Asuna took off her overcoat and scarf with her back to us. Her chestnut hair danced wildly in the wind as it reflected the sunlight.

Although she wore only a grass-colored long skirt and a shirt of hemp cloth, a rapier shone at the left side of her hip like a mirror. She drew it with her right hand, and the sword gave a clear ringing noise as she waited resolutely for the huge fish to come.

Nishida, who was standing beside me, finally got back to his senses and shook my arm while shouting:

"Kirito-san! Your, your wife is in danger!!"

"No, we can just let her handle this."

"What are you saying!? I-If that's what you're going to say, then I'll..."

He snatched a fishing rod from a nearby companion and prepared to rush to Asuna with a tragic expression on his face. I had to quickly stop this old fisherman.

The gigantic fish didn't slow down one bit. It opened its huge mouth, which was lined with countless sharp teeth, and threw its entire body at Asuna as if trying to swallow her whole. Asuna turned the left side of her body away from the fish while her right hand flew out with a silver-white light streaming behind it.

A blinding flash of light erupted from the fish's mouth with an explosive sound effect. The fish was thrown high into the air, but Asuna hadn't even moved from her spot.

Although the sheer size of the monster induced fear, I had guessed that its level couldn't be very high. There was no way that a monster from such a low floor, especially one from a fishing-related event, could be that strong. After all, SAO was a game that kept to the normal pattern of online games.

The fish fell onto the ground with a crash, its HP greatly reduced by Asuna's attack. Then, Asuna mercilessly launched into a chain of consecutive attacks worthy of her title «Flash».

Nishida and the other spectators watched wordlessly as Asuna activated one skill after another while she stepped gracefully as if dancing. Was it Asuna's beauty or her strength that mesmerized them? I thought that it was probably both.

As Asuna swung her sword with a presence that overwhelmed everything around her, she saw that her opponent's HP had gone into the red zone and jumped back to widen the distance between them. After landing, she went straight into a charge attack. She dashed towards the fish, leaving a trail of light behind her as if she was a comet. It was one of the highest level rapier skills: «Flashing Penetrator».

With a sound effect similar to a sonic boom, the comet penetrated the fish from its mouth to its tail. As Asuna skidded to a stop, the huge monster behind her fragmented into numerous bits of light and scattered. There was a loud smashing sound which created a huge ripple on the lake's surface.

Asuna sheathed her rapier with a "clink" and walked nonchalantly over to us. Nishida and the other fishermen were left with their mouths gaping wide open, unable to even move.

"Hey, good job."

"It's not fair, making me fight by myself. You're buying lunch next time."

"Our money is shared data now."

"Oh, right..."

As Asuna and I went on with our relaxed conversation, Nishida finally managed to blink and open his mouth.

"...ah, that was surprising... Madam, you, you're really strong. This might be a bit rude, but how high is your level...?"

Asuna and I looked at each other. Staying on this topic for too long might be dangerous for us.

"Be-Before that, look, the fish dropped an item."

Asuna pressed a couple of things on the window and a silver fishing rod appeared in her hands. Since an event monster had dropped it, it was most likely an unsellable rare item.

"Oh, ooh, this is!?"

Nishida received the fishing rod with sparkling eyes. All the spectators became interested in this as well. Just as I thought that we had managed to safely avert this crisis...

"Are...are you Asuna from the Knights of the Blood...?"

A young player took several steps closer to Asuna and stared intently at her face. Then his face brightened.

"Yeah, you are! I've even got a picture!!"

"Ah..."

Asuna forced a smile and took a few steps back. The spectators then doubled their excitement.

"It's, it's an honor! To be able to see Asuna-san fighting so close up... Oh yeah! Can, can you give me an autogra..."

The young man suddenly stopped talking and then shifted his gaze between Asuna and me a few times. He finally muttered with a surprised expression:

"Are...are you two... married...?"

It was now my turn to force a smile. As both of us stood there with unnatural smiles plastered on, shouts of anguish rose up all around us. Only Nishida continued to blink without any idea of what was going on.

Our secret honeymoon ended like this after only two weeks. But maybe we should consider ourselves lucky to take part in such a fun event at the end.

That night, we received a message from Heathcliff, requesting us to take part in fighting the seventy-fifth floor boss.

The next morning.

As I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the ground, Asuna, who had finished getting ready, walked over to me while the iron soles of her boots clanked against the ground.

"Hey, you can't be like this forever."

"But it's only been two weeks."

I replied childishly and raised my head. But I couldn't deny that looking at Asuna in her white-red knight uniform for the first time in a while was very attractive.

Seeing as we had temporarily left the guild, we could decline the request. But the last line of the message, that "some people had already died," laid heavily on our minds.

"Well, we should at least go listen to what's going on. Come on, it's already time!"

As she tapped me on the back, I finally stood up with reluctance and opened the equipment screen. Since we weren't part of the guild right now, I put on my familiar black leather coat and a minimalistic set of armor, then slung my two swords onto my back with the scabbards crossing each other. The heavy weight on my back felt like they were complaining about being left in the inventory for so long. With a quick movement, I drew them slightly and then sheathed them again; a high and clear metallic sound rang through the room.

"Yeah. This appearance suits you best."

Asuna smiled and hung onto my right arm. I looked back and bade farewell to our new home, which we were going to be away from for a while.

"...let's get this over with quickly and then come back."

"Yeah!"

We looked at each other and nodded. Then we opened the door and stepped outside into the cold winter air.

At the gate plaza of the twenty-second floor, we found Nishida waiting for us with a fishing rod in his hand. We had told only him the time when we were going to leave.

"Could we talk for a bit?"

I nodded to Nishida's request, and the three of us sat down next to each other on a bench in the plaza. Nishida started talking slowly as he stared up towards the upper floors.

"To tell the truth...until today, stories about how people were fighting to clear the game on the upper floors sounded like they came from another world... Perhaps I had already given up on the thought of leaving this place."

Asuna and I listened to him silently.

"I think you already know this, but the IT industry progresses almost daily. I had started this career when I was young, so I was able to keep up with the industry back then. But now I had been out of the field for about two years, I figured it would be impossible for me to catch up now. Since I don't know whether I could return to my old job or not, or if I would be treated as a hindrance and simply tossed away, I thought that it would be better for me to keep fishing here—

He stopped talking and formed a smile on his old, wrinkled face. I didn't know what to say. I suppose I couldn't even imagine all the things he lost when he became imprisoned in SAO.

"I also—"

Asuna suddenly started talking.

"Until half a year ago, I also thought about those sorts of things and cried by myself every night. As each day passed here, it felt as if everything: my friends, my family, going to college, everything related to the real world was being ruined. I always dreamed of the other world when I slept... I thought that all I could do was to get stronger quickly, to clear this game faster, and the only way to do so was to fanatically train my weapon skills."

I looked at Asuna in surprise. Although I never paid much attention to others before...but I never felt anything like this from her during all our interactions. Well, this wouldn't be the first time that I had guessed someone's personality wrong...

Asuna caught my gaze and smiled briefly before continuing:

"But on a day about half a year ago, after I had just teleported to the city on the front lines, I saw someone taking a nap on the grass of the plaza. He looked as if he was at a pretty high level, so I got angry and said, 'If you have time to kill here, go into the dungeon and try to clear some more of it...!'"

Then she covered her mouth with her hand and laughed.

"Then that person unexpectedly replied, 'It's the best season in Aincrad, and the weather setting is really good too. It would be a shame to go into the dungeon on a day like this.' Then he gestured to the space next to him and said, 'Why don't you take a nap as well?' He was so rude."

Asuna stopped smiling; her eyes became distant before she continued:

"But what he said surprised me. I realized that 'this person was actually living properly within this world.' He didn't mind losing days in the real world and instead focused on experiencing each day within this world. I discovered that there were actually people like this, so I sent away the other guild members and tried laying down next to him. Because the wind felt so good...just the right warmth for people, I fell asleep. I didn't have any nightmares that time. It was probably the first time I had such a good sleep since coming to this world. By the time I woke up, it was already in the afternoon, and that person was looking at me impatiently. That person was him..."

As she finished, Asuna tightly grasped my hand. I felt extremely embarrassed. I did sort of remember something like that, but...

"Sorry, Asuna... I didn't mean anything that deep by it; I just wanted to take a nap..."

"I knew that even if you didn't tell me!"

Asuna pouted, then she turned back towards Nishida with a smiling face before continuing:

"From that day on...I went to sleep thinking of him, and as a result the nightmares went away. I found out where his hometown was and would set aside some time to go see him every once in a while...then I began to look forward to the coming of each day...when I realized that I was in love, I was so happy and swore to treasure this emotion. That was the first time when I thought that coming to this world was a great thing..."

Asuna lowered her head, rubbing her eyes with her gloved hands, and then took a deep breath.

"Kirito-kun is the meaning behind the two years of my life spent here. He is also the proof that I'm alive and the reason for looking forward to tomorrow. I had put on the Nerve Gear and come to this world in order to meet him. Nishida oji-san...it might not be my place to say this, but I think you've definitely achieved something within this world. There is no doubt that this is a virtual world, that everything we see and touch is an imitation created from data. But to us, our hearts do exist within this reality. If that's true, then everything we're experiencing here should also be true."

Nishida blinked continuously and nodded several times. His eyes were moist behind his glasses. I was also trying my best to hold back my tears.

"It was me", I thought. I was the one who was saved when I couldn't find the reason for being alive, whether when I was in the real world or after I came to this one.

"...yes. Yes, you're right..."

Nishida looked up at the sky again and spoke.

"What I have heard here is also a priceless experience. Having caught a five meter fish is also one... It seems that my life here hasn't been meaningless. It was not meaningless at all."

Nishida nodded once and then stood up.

"Ah, it seems that I've taken up too much of your time. I firmly believe that if people like you are fighting to free us, then we should all be able to return to the real world soon... Although there's nothing that I can do to help, I could at least encourage you and cheer you on."

Nishida held our hands and shook them.

"We'll come back. Please keep us company when we do."

As I promised with my index finger, Nishida nodded with a huge smile as tears streamed down his face.

We firmly shook hands with Nishida and then walked over to the teleport gate. As we entered the space that shimmered like an illusion, Asuna and I looked at each other and then opened our mouths at the same time:

"Teleport—Grandum!"

The blue light that started to cover our vision erased the image of Nishida as he kept waving at us.

Chapter 20

“The scouting party was wiped out---!?”

We were greeted with this shocking news when we returned to the KoB headquarters in Grandum for the first time in two weeks.

We were currently on one of the higher floors of the iron tower which served as the headquarters and inside the conference room with the huge window where we had talked with Heathcliff last time. Heathcliff sat at the center of the huge semi-circular table, dressed in his usual long robes. The other leaders of the guild sat on either side of him, except this time Godfrey wasn't present.

Heathcliff clasped the bony fingers of his hands together in front of his face and nodded slowly with a deep frown.

“It happened yesterday. Mapping the seventy-fifth floor labyrinth took quite a long time, but we were able to finish it without any casualties. Although I had expected that we would have a hard time defeating the boss...”

I did have a feeling that something like this might happen. The reason was that, of all the labyrinth bosses, only the ones from the twenty-fifth and fiftieth floors were extraordinarily large and powerful, which resulted in heavy losses from both of those fights.

The fight against the two-headed giant on the twenty-fifth floor virtually annihilated the elite troops of «The Army», which was the main cause of their decline as an organization. When the six-armed monster, which looked like a metallic statue of Buddha, launched a fierce assault during the fiftieth floor battle, numerous players had been frightened into teleporting away without permission and nearly caused the front line to collapse. If the reinforcements had been even a little late, we would have faced another total wipeout. As a matter of fact, the person who had held the line by himself during that battle until support arrived was right in front of me.

If an exceptionally strong boss awaited at every twenty-fifth level, then it was very likely that this boss would be the same.

“...So, I sent a scouting party of twenty men consisting of members from five different guilds.”

Heathcliff continued in a monotone. Since his eyes were currently half-open, it was impossible to discern his emotions behind those copper-colored eyes.

“They had scouted with utmost care. Ten of them had stayed outside the boss room as reserves...but when the first ten entered and reached the center of the room, the gates closed just as the boss appeared. According to the reports of the ten who waited outside, the doors stayed closed for over five minutes, and nothing they did, including lockpicking or bashing the door, had any effect. By the time the door had finally opened---”

The edge of Heathcliff’s mouth became tense. He closed his eyes for a moment and then continued.

“There was nobody in the room. The boss and the ten men had all disappeared. There was no sign of teleportation. They didn’t return... and I sent somebody to check the death list on the metallic monument inside Black Iron Castle for confirmation...”

He didn’t say the next part aloud and simply shook his head. Next to me, Asuna held her breath and then managed to force out in a small voice:

“Ten...people... How did this happen...”

“An anti-crystal field...?”

Heathcliff nodded briefly to my question.

“That's the only explanation. According to Asuna-kun's report, the seventy-fourth floor was the same, so it's highly probable that every boss room from now on would all have anti-crystal fields.”

“Damn it...”

I cursed. If emergency escape was impossible, the chances of people dying due to unexpected circumstances were drastically increased. We won’t produce any casualties—that was the most important guideline to follow while clearing the game. But it was impossible to clear it unless we defeated the bosses...

“It's become more and more like a true game of death...”

“However, we can't give up on clearing this game just because of this...”

Heathcliff closed his eyes and then spoke in a quiet but determined voice:

“In addition to the anti-crystal field, the room also blocked the exit as soon as the boss appeared. Since this is the case, we can only attack it with the largest team of players that we can command and coordinate. I originally didn't want to call you two back since you had just gotten married, but I hope you can understand our dilemma.”

I answered with a shrug.

“We’ll help. But I will be putting Asuna's safety as my top priority. If a dangerous situation arises, I will be putting her before the rest of the party.”

Heathcliff smiled in an almost unnoticeable manner.

“One who wishes to protect another is capable of unleashing the greatest strength. I look forward to your achievements on the battlefield. The assault will begin in three hours. Thirty-two people, including you two, are expected to participate. We will meet in front of the teleport gate in Collinia on the seventy-fifth floor at one o'clock. You are dismissed.”

As he finished, the red paladin and his men stood up and left the room.

“Three hours--- What should we do?”

Asuna asked as she absentmindedly sat down on the steel bench. I simply watched her in silence. Her body which was covered by a white combat uniform with red decorations, her long and silky hair, her sparkling brown eyes—she was as beautiful as a priceless gem.

When she noticed that I kept looking at her without shifting my gaze, Asuna blushed and asked with an embarrassed smile:

“Wha…what?”

I hesitantly opened my mouth:

“...Asuna...”

“What?”

“...Please don't get angry and listen to me. This boss fight today...could you not take part and wait here for my return?”

Asuna first stared at me, then she lowered her head with a melancholic expression and said:

“...Why are you saying this...?”

“Despite what Heathcliff said, we simply can't predict what will happen in a place where crystals can't be used. I'm really afraid...when I think about it...that something will happen to you...”

“...You want me to wait in a safe location while you go to somewhere that dangerous by yourself?”

Asuna stood up and walked towards me with confident steps. Her eyes were aflame with passion.

“If I did that and you didn’t return, then I’d commit suicide. Not only would I lose my reason to keep living, I would also never forgive myself for simply waiting here. If you want to run away, then we'll run away together. If that's what you want to do, then I'm fine with it.”

She finished talking and touched the center of my chest with the fingertips of her right hand. Her eyes softened and a soft smile appeared on her face.

“But, you know...everybody taking part in today's battle is afraid, and they all want to run away. Yet, despite the fear, they still agreed to join. That's because the leader and Kirito-kun...because the two strongest people in this world are leading them…that's what I think...I know that you don't like to bear responsibility. But I hope that you’ll try, just this once, not only for them, but also for us...so we can return to the real world, so we can meet again; I hope we can try our best together.”

I raised my right hand and clasped Asuna's hand softly. The feeling that I didn't want to lose her flooded out from deep within my heart.

"...Sorry...I, became weak for a moment. To tell the truth, I really wish we could just run away together. I don't want you to die, and I don't want to die either. We don't have to..."

I gazed into Asuna's eyes and kept on talking:

"It's fine if we can't return to the real world... I want to go on living with you in that forest lodge. The two of us...forever..."

Asuna grasped her chest with her remaining hand. She closed her eyes and frowned, as if she was trying to endure something. Then, a dejected sigh escaped her lips.

"Yeah...it really is like a dream... It would be great if we could do that...spending each day together...forever..."

She stopped here and bit her lip as if she was letting go of a hopeless wish. Then she opened her eyes and looked up to me with a serious expression on her face.

"Kirito-kun, have you ever thought about it...? About what's happening to our real bodies right now?"

I was struck speechless by this unexpected question. It was probably something that every player here wondered about. But since there was no way of contacting the outside world, it was useless to think about it. Although everyone was scared, they also avoided confronting this question.

"Do you remember? That person's...Kayaba Akihiko's introduction at the beginning of the game. He said that the Nerve Gear would permit two hours of disconnection. But the reason for that was..."

"…to move our bodies to the proper medical facilities..."

Asuna nodded as I muttered this.

"Then a few days later, everyone had been cut off for about an hour, right?"

Something like that had definitely happened. I had looked at the disconnection warning and worried about whether or not the Nerve Gear would kill me in two hours.

"I think everybody had been moved to hospitals then. It's impossible to take care of a comatose person for years in a normal household. They most likely moved us to a hospital and then linked us back up again..."

"...Yeah, I think you're right..."

"If our bodies are just lying on a bed, managing to stay alive only through the numerous cords connected to them… I don't think that they'll remain safe in that situation forever."

I was suddenly overtaken by the fear that my body was starting to fade away; I hugged Asuna to confirm our existence.

“...In other words...regardless of whether or not we can clear the game…there will always be a time limit...”

“...And this time limit will differ from person to person... Since talking about «the other side» is a taboo here, I haven't discussed this with anyone else... But you're different. I...I want to spent my whole life by your side. I want to go out with you for real, get married to you for real, and then grow old together. So...so...”

She couldn’t continue. Asuna buried her face in my chest and let the tears flow. I slowly stroked her back to help her finish her words.

“So...we have no choice but to fight right now...”

My fears didn't actually go away. But how could I give up now when Asuna was doing her best to open up our future while trying so hard to keep herself from collapsing.

It’s alright—it will definitely be alright. As long as we're together, it will definitely—

I strengthened my arms and hugged Asuna tightly to get rid of the eerie feeling that threatened to overtake me.

Chapter 21

There was a group of obviously high-level players waiting in the seventy-fifth level teleport gate plaza in Collinia, so I figured they must be the boss party. As Asuna and I stepped out of the gate and headed towards them, they all closed their mouths and sent a tense glance our way. Some of them even gave us a guild salute.

I stopped walking as surprise overwhelmed me. But Asuna saluted in reply and then jabbed me on the side.

“Hora, Kirito-kun, you’re a leader now, so you have to greet them properly!”

“What…?”

I saluted them awkwardly. I had taken part in numerous boss parties up until now, but this was the first time I had received so much attention.

“Hey!”

Someone thumped me on the shoulder, and I turned around and saw the katana-wielder, Cline, smiling under his bandana. Surprisingly, Egil's huge build also stood beside him, fully equipped with a two-handed axe in his hands.

“What……you guys are taking part as well?”

“Why are you surprised!? Aren’t you taking us a bit too lightly!?”

Egil shouted indignantly.

“I even left my shop because I heard that you guys were having a hard time. To think that you don’t appreciate my selfless sacrifice….”

I hit Egil’s arm as he declared with overstated body motions.

“I understand your sentiments very well. So we can count you out when we share the goods right?”

When I said that, the giant shook his bald head and gathered his eyebrows into an eight (八) sign.

“Well. Tha-that’s a bit….”

As his faltering voice trailed off, Asuna and Cline simultaneously burst into laughter. It quickly spread to the other players and seemingly washed away everyone's anxiety.

At exactly one o'clock, several new players arrived at the gate. It was Heathcliff, dressed in his red overcoat with his huge cross-shaped shield in hand, and the elites of the KoB. A tense atmosphere overcame the players once again as they saw the newcomers.

If we were to compare only levels and stats, the only person who would be higher than Asuna and I would probably be Heathcliff himself. But their coordination projected the strength of their teamwork. Other than the red and white guild colors, their armor and weapons were all completely different; yet the strength of the bonds between them was far superior to that of «The Army» unit we had seen.

The paladin and his four subordinates walked straight towards us, which split the group of assembled players into two. Cline and Egil were both forced to take a few steps back, while Asuna calmly exchanged a salute with them.

After coming to a stop, Heathcliff nodded towards us before he spoke to the entire group:

“It seems that everybody is here. Thank you all for that. I think that everybody understands our current situation. This will be a hard battle, but I believe that with your strength we will prevail. We shall fight for our freedom from this game---!”

As Heathcliff shouted in a powerful voice, the other players joined in with an inspiring roar of their own. I was surprised at the charisma which drew others to him like a magnet. It was surprising to see a person with such leadership qualities amongst the hardcore gamers that usually lack social coordination, or maybe it was this world that nurtured his talents? I wondered what he did in the real world...

Heathcliff turned my way as if he had felt my gaze, and then said with a smile:

“Kirito-kun, I look forward to your efforts. I hope you’ll use your «Dual Blades» to its fullest.”

Neither pressure nor fear could be heard from his low and soft voice. One couldn't help but be amazed at the fact that Heathcliff maintained such a laid back attitude despite facing a difficult battle ahead of us.

After I nodded silently, Heathcliff turned back towards the players and raised his hand up into the air.

“Then we start. I will open a corridor that leads directly to the area in front of the boss room.”

He took out a navy blue crystal from his pouch as he said this, sending murmurs and awe through the other players.

Normal teleport crystals can only transport the user to a chosen city's teleport gate, but the item Heathcliff had taken out was a «Corridor Crystal», which could open a teleport gate to any location that the player marked. Needless to say, it was an exceptionally useful item.

But since it was so handy, it was also extremely rare and wasn't sold in NPC shops. It could only be acquired from labyrinth treasure chests or as a drop from monsters, so few players were willing to use it even if they had one. The reason that the players voiced their surprise was not because they had seen a rare item, but because Heathcliff was willing to use it.

Heathcliff raised the crystal, oblivious to the stares of the other players, and yelled:

“Corridor open.”

The exceedingly expensive crystal shattered and a blue whirlpool of light appeared.

“Then, everyone, follow me.”

After he swept his gaze across the whole group, Heathcliff leapt into the blue light with his red clothes fluttering behind him. His body was immediately engulfed by the light and disappeared in an instant. His four KoB subordinates then followed him without delay.

At some point, many people began gathering around the plaza. They must have heard about the boss battle and had come out to see us off. The warriors walked into the light one after another amidst cries of encouragement.

Asuna and I were soon the only ones left. We looked at each other and exchanged a slight nod before we held our hands and jumped into the whirlpool of light together.

After the dizzying sensation of teleportation had passed, I opened my eyes and saw that we were already in the labyrinth. It was a remarkably wide corridor, with two rows of thick pillars and a huge gate at the end.

The labyrinth of the seventy-fifth floor was built from some type of faintly transparent obsidian. Unlike the crude and rough labyrinths of the lower floors, the stones here were smoothly polished and stacked together with no gaps in between. The air was cold and damp, and a thin layer of mist covered the floor.

Asuna covered herself with both arms as if she felt cold and then spoke:

“……Somehow……I have a really bad feeling…”

“Yeah…”

I agreed.

In the two years up until now, we have cleared seventy-four labyrinths and defeated an equal number of boss monsters. After gaining so much experience, we can roughly guess the strength of the boss just by looking at its lair.

The thirty players around us were all opening their windows and checking their equipped items; their expressions were all very serious.

I led Asuna behind a pillar and put my arm around her thin body. The anxiety that I had been holding back burst forth now that the fight was near. My body had even started shaking.

“…Don't worry.”

Asuna whispered into my ear.

“I’ll protect you.”

“No…it's not that I'm afraid of fighting…”

“Fufu.”

Asuna gave a small laugh and continued:

“So…you have to protect me as well, Kirito-kun.”

“Yeah…definitely.”

I squeezed my arm around her once more before breaking apart. Heathcliff, who had now gotten his cross-shaped shield out, spoke with his equipment clanking.

“Is everyone ready? We have no information about the boss’ behavioral patterns. The KoB will be in charge of holding back the enemy's attacks; everyone should take this chance to analyze the enemy's attack patterns and counterattack accordingly.”

Everybody nodded silently.

“Then—let’s go.”

Heathcliff said softly. Then he walked confidently over to the obsidian door and placed his hand in the middle of it. This caused everyone to become extra tense.

I tapped the shoulders of Cline and Egil, who were both beside me, and told them as they turned around:

“Don’t die.”

“Heh, worry about yourself instead.”

“I have no intention of dying before I make a fortune with the rare items I’ll get from today’s fight.”

As they gave their arrogantly-humored responses, the door began to open with a heavy sound. The players all readied their weapons, so I drew both my swords from my back as well. I glanced at Asuna, who had her rapier in hand, and then nodded to her.

Heathcliff drew his sword from his shield last. He then raised his hand up into the air and shouted,

“—Begin battle!”

Then he walked past the wide-open gates and into the room, with everyone else following right behind him.

The room's inside was shaped like a huge dome. It seemed about as wide as the arena Heathcliff and I dueled in. The dark walls soared into the air and curved high above our heads. Right after the thirty-two players entered the room and got into formation—the doors behind us closed with a boom. Now it was impossible to open unless either the boss died or we got wiped out.

The entire group fell into silence for a long moment. Although we kept our watch on the surrounding floor, the boss still hadn't appeared. Time held our nerves tight as one second slowly passed after another.

“Hey---”

Just as someone couldn't endure the tense silence any longer...

“Above us!!”

Asuna shouted next to me. I looked upwards in surprise.

On the ceiling of the dome—it was there.

It was exceptionally huge and long.

A centipede—!?

That thought passed through my mind the moment I saw it. It was about ten meters long. But the body that was divided into numerous parts reminded me more of a human spine than an insect. Sharp legs made of bare bones could be seen protruding from every joint. As I shifted my glance down the body, it became thicker until the hideous skull came to sight. It wasn’t the skull of a human. At the end of the smooth skull, there were two pairs of sharply upturned eye sockets with blue flames smoldering inside. The jaws were jutted outwards and filled with a row of sharp teeth, while two massive arms in the shape of scythes were attached on either sides of the skull.

When I focused my gaze on it, the monster’s name appeared along with a yellow cursor: «The Skullreaper» --- the skeletal hunter-killer.

As the shocked players watched the skeletal centipede crawl along the ceiling on its numerous legs, it suddenly spread its legs wide — and then dove straight into us.

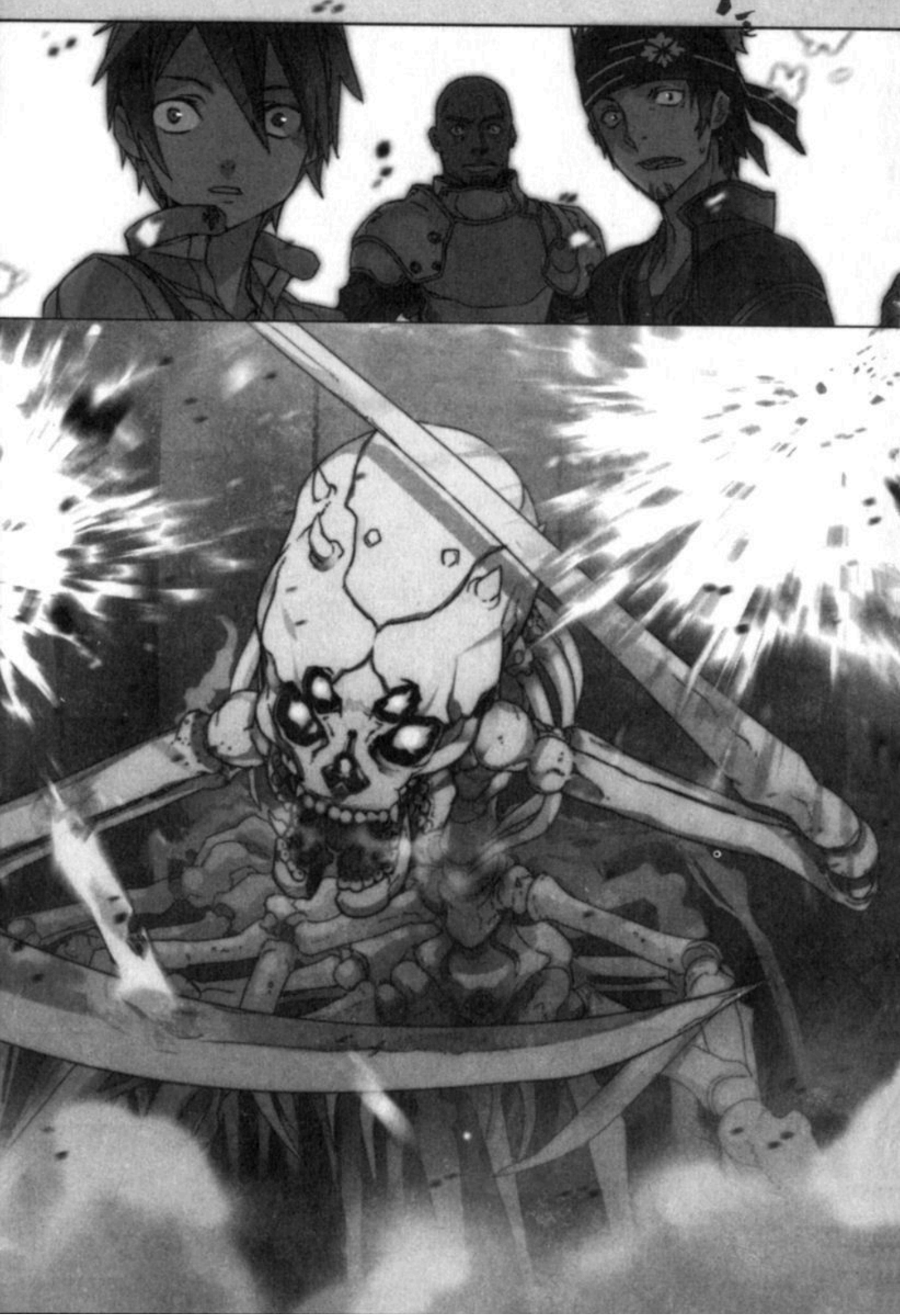
“Don’t just stand there! Scatter!!”

Heathcliff’s sharp voice cut through the frozen air. The players finally came to their senses and began to move. We hurried to get away from the estimated landing area as well.

But the three people who were positioned directly under the skeletal centipede's dive were a little slow. They simply stood there and looked up as if unsure of which direction to move in.

“This way!”

I shouted in a hurry. The three players then became unfrozen and started running towards me---



But in that moment, the centipede landed behind them and the whole floor shook violently. The three lost their balance as a result, just as the centipede swung its right arm— a huge bone scythe that was as long as a person— and cleaved directly into them.

The three players were sliced once in their backs and sent flying simultaneously. Their HP decreased quickly as they flew through the air—straight past the yellow area and into the red danger area—

"---!?"

Then they all reached zero, and the three bodies that were still in the air shattered into countless shards and scattered. The sound effects of death overlapped one another.

"----!!"

I heard Asuna hold her breath beside me. I could feel my body becoming rigid with shock.

They died—in one hit—?!

In the SAO system, which used both levels and skills, one's maximum HP rose with level, so higher level meant harder to kill regardless of one's fighting skills. The party here today was composed of only high-level players, so even if it was a boss, everyone should still be able to withstand at least a short combo attack—that's what everyone had thought. Yet in just one hit—

"This…is impossible…."

Asuna muttered in a forced voice.

The skeletal centipede that had taken the lives of three people in an instant raised its upper body and charged at another group of players with a thunderous roar.

"Ahhhh--!!"

The players in that direction screamed in panic. The bone scythe was raised high up into the air once again.

In this critical moment, a figure jumped in right beneath the scythe. It was Heathcliff. He raised his large shield and blocked the attack, sending out an ear-rending sound of impact and a shower of sparks.

But there were two scythes. While its left arm continued to attack Heathcliff, it raised its right scythe and swung down at the frozen players.

"Dammit……!"

I ran in almost subconsciously, quickly covering the distance as if I was flying, and flung myself directly in front of the scythe. Then I crossed my swords and blocked its attack.

The tremulous force of impact struck my body. But—the scythe didn’t stop. As sparks flew from it, the scythe pushed back my swords and came towards me.

It’s too powerful—!

At this moment, a new sword flew in with a trail of white light and struck the scythe. A clashing noise resounded. As the scythe weakened during this moment, I immediately pushed with all my might and managed to force the bone scythe back.

Next to me, Asuna glanced my way and said,

“If we both hit it at the same time—we can block its attacks! If it’s us, then it’s possible!!”

“Okay—let’s do this!”

I nodded. Just knowing that Asuna was next to me gave me boundless strength.

As the scythe swung horizontally towards us once again, both Asuna and I swung towards the lower right to parry. Our swords struck the scythe head on in perfect unison, and this time it was the scythe that was knocked back.

I strengthened my voice and shouted:

“We’ll stop the scythes! Everyone else attack its sides!”

It was as if my voice finally freed everyone from some spell. The players shouted, raised their weapons, and charged at the body of the skeletal centipede. A number of hits cut deeply into the enemy's body and the boss' HP finally decreased a bit.

But immediately afterwards, I could hear the screaming of several players. I risked a glance after countering the scythe again and saw a few people get knocked down by the long, spear-like bone at the end of the centipede's tail.

“Argh…!”

I gritted my teeth. We should help, but Asuna and I, as well as Heathcliff who was guarding against the left scythe by himself only a little further away, already had our hands full.

“Kirito-kun…!”

At Asuna’s voice, I turned my gaze over to her.

—No! If we get distracted we’ll be hit!

—Yeah, you’re right… It’s coming again!!

—Block with a left vertical upward cut!

We spoke to each other with only exchanged glances and blocked the scythe with perfectly synchronized movements.

We forced ourselves to ignore the screams that could be heard from time to time and concentrated on blocking the enemy's powerful blows. Amazingly, we didn’t need to talk or even glance at one another. It was as if we were directly linked to the other. The enemy attacked so fast that it didn't even leave breathing room, but we still managed to counter it every time by activating the same skills at precisely the same instant.

Just then—as I fought at my limits for my very life, I experienced a feeling that I had never felt before. It was a totally surreal experience—as if Asuna and I had fused into one person and were swinging one sword. Our HP continued to decrease bit by bit due to the aftershock of the enemy's strikes we blocked, but we were already beyond caring about such things.

Chapter 22

The fighting continued for over an hour.

It felt like an eternity had passed before the battle finally finished. When the boss monster's huge body shattered into countless shards, no one had even the energy to cheer. Everyone either collapsed into a sitting position on the obsidian ground or laid down completely with their breathing ragged.

Is it—over…?

Yeah—it's over—

After we exchanged these thoughts, it felt like the «link» between Asuna and I also severed. Fatigue suddenly overwhelmed my body and I knelt down onto the floor. Asuna and I sat with our backs against each other, feeling as if we wouldn't be able to do anything for a while.

We were both alive—but even when I thought of this, I just couldn't be happy about the situation. Too many people had died. After the first three deaths at the start of the battle, the grim sound effect of people shattering continued to resound at a steady pace and I had forced myself to stop counting at the sixth one.

"How many—died…?"

Cline, who was sitting to my left, asked in a wheezing voice. Egil, who was lying on the floor next to him with his arms and legs spread out, also turned his head this way.

I waved my right hand to open the map and then counted the green dots on it. I subtracted the tally from the number of people who had been present when we first set off.

"—Fourteen dead."

I couldn't believe this number even though I had counted it myself.

They were all high-leveled, skilled warriors who had experienced countless battles. Even if we couldn't escape or heal instantly, we should still be able to avoid suffering too many deaths if we fought in a manner that put survival first—that's what we had all thought, but—

"…Impossible…"

Egil's voice didn't carry a hint of its usual brightness. A depressing gloom pressed down on the survivors.

We were only three-fourths of the way there—there were still twenty-five floors left to clear. Even though there were thousands of players here, only a few hundred were still serious about clearing the game. If every floor generated as many fatalities as this one, then it was highly possible—that only one person would face the final boss.

If that happened, the last one standing would probably be that man…

I shifted my gaze further back into the room. Amongst everybody who sat on the floor, a single red-clothed figure continued to stand straight. That person was Heathcliff.

Of course, he wasn't unscathed. As I focused on him, the cursor appeared to show his HP, and I could tell that he had taken quite a bit of damage. He had blocked the bone scythe, which Asuna and I had barely managed to keep at bay, by himself until the end. It wouldn't be strange if he collapsed from exhaustion alone regardless of his HP.

But I couldn't feel even the slightest hint of tiredness from his calm figure. It was a toughness that was hard to believe. It was as if—he was a fighting machine…

Because my mind was hazy due to the fatigue, I continued to stare at the side of Heathcliff's face. The legend's expression was composed. He was silently looking down at the sitting KoB members and the other players. His eyes were warm and full of mercy—as if—

As if he was looking at a bunch of white mice playing in an inescapable cage.

Just then, a shudder racked through my body.

My mind became clear in an instant. My body grew cold, starting from the tips of my fingers and spreading all the way to the center of my brain. It was a strange foreboding. The impossible idea infested my mind like a seed and suspicion grew from it.

The expression within Heathcliff's eyes, the calmness it showed, it wasn't a look that consoled his wounded comrades. He wasn't standing on the same level as us. His expression was offering mercy from some faraway place high above us—it was the expression of a god…

I thought of the inhuman reaction speed that Heathcliff had shown during our duel. It had far surpassed the speed of a human being. No, I said that wrongly; it had far surpassed the limits that SAO had set on the players.

Add his usual behavior on top of that: he was the leader of the strongest guild, yet he never gave any orders and simply watched the other players take care of things. Maybe that wasn't because he trusted his men—maybe he was holding himself back because he knew of things that normal players didn't!

He was a being that wasn't bound by the rules of this game of death. Yet he wasn't an NPC. There was no way that a program could be able to make such a merciful expression.

If he was neither an NPC nor a normal player, then there was only one possibility left. But how on earth do I confirm this? There was just no way to…not even one.

No, there is. It was a way that I could try only right here and right now.

I looked at Heathcliff's HP bar. It had been greatly reduced from the hard fight. But it hadn't dropped to fifty percent. It was barely, just barely in the blue zone.

No one had ever seen this person's HP go into the yellow zone. He had an overwhelming defense that nobody could even compare with.

During his duel with me, his expression had changed the moment his HP had neared the halfway point. It shouldn't be a fear of his HP turning yellow.

It was—most probably—

I slowly fixed my grip on the sword in my right hand. I pulled my right foot back with the tiniest movements. I bent my hips back slightly and got into a low dash position. Heathcliff didn't notice any of my movements. His warm gaze was currently directed only towards his tired guild members.

If my guess was wrong, then I would be branded a criminal and be punished without mercy.

If that happens…I'm sorry…

I glanced at Asuna, who sat next to me. She raised her head at the same time and our eyes met.

"Kirito-kun…?"

A surprised expression overcame Asuna, whose mouth moved yet gave off no voice. But at that moment, my right foot had already kicked off against the ground.

There was ten meters between me and Heathcliff. I sped towards him at full speed with my body almost touching the ground and reached him in an instant. Then I tilted my sword and stabbed upwards. It was the basic one-handed sword skill «Rage Spike». Since it was a weak skill, it shouldn't kill Heathcliff even if it made a critical hit. But if my guess was right—

The blade rushed in from the left, leaving a trail of bright blue light. Heathcliff reacted with surprising speed, and an expression of shock appeared on his face. He immediately lifted his shield in an attempt to guard.

But I had already seen him perform that motion many times during our duel and remembered it clearly. My sword dissolved into a streak of light, changed its course in midair, and scraped along the edge of his shield before continuing to pierce towards his chest.

But just before the sword struck him, it was stopped by an invisible wall. A powerful shock coursed through my arm. A spark of purple light flashed and a message of the same colour appeared—a system message between us.

[Immortal Object]. It wasn't a status that weak beings like us players could have. What Heathcliff had feared during the duel must be the revelation of this godlike safeguard to everyone.

"Kirito-kun, what are you---"

Asuna, who had shouted in surprise at my sudden attack and ran after me, suddenly stopped and froze in place after seeing the message. Me, Heathcliff, Cline, and all the other players around us were completely motionless as well. The system message faded slowly in the midst of this stillness.

I lowered my sword and jumped back lightly, widening the distance between Heathcliff and myself. Asuna took a couple of steps forward and stood next to me.

“Immortality granted by the system… how’s this possible… guild master…?”

Heathcliff didn’t respond even after hearing Asuna’s confused voice. He simply glared at me with a severe expression. With both of my swords in hand, I opened my mouth and spoke:

“This is the truth behind the legend. His HP was protected by the system and wouldn't fall into the yellow zone no matter what happened to him. The status of immortality... other than NPCs, only system administrators could have it. But this game didn't have any administrators, except for maybe one person...”

I stopped talking at this point and glanced upwards into the skies.

“…I had always wondered after my arrival in this world… just where he was watching us from as he manipulated this world. But I forgot one simple truth, one that even a little kid should know.”

I looked straight at the red paladin and continued:

“«There's nothing more boring than watching someone else play a game». Isn't that right?…… Kayaba Akihiko?”

There was a stunned silence, as if everyone had just frozen over.

Heathcliff was glaring at me with an emotionless expression. The players around us didn’t move even a muscle. No, it was more accurate to say that they couldn’t move.

Asuna took a step forward from beside me. Her eyes didn't contain a trace of emotion, as if they were bottomless voids. She opened her mouth slightly and spoke in a dry and barely audible voice.

“Leader……is this…… true…?”

Heathcliff ignored her question. Instead, he tilted his head slightly and asked me:

“…Just for reference, could you tell me how you figured it out?”

“…The first time I thought that something was off was during our duel, because your speed during that final moment was simply too fast.”

“As I expected. That was a grievous mistake on my part. I was so overwhelmed by your speed that I ended up using the system’s assistance past its normal limits.”

As Heathcliff nodded, his face finally revealed another expression; his lips moved slightly to form a bitter smile.

“I originally expected to reach the ninety-fifth floor before this would be revealed.”

His smile turned into one of authority as he slowly swept his gaze across the players. Then, the red paladin stated confidently:

“—Yes. I am Kayaba Akihiko. I am also the final boss of the game who awaits you all on the top floor.”

I felt Asuna sway slightly beside me. I extended my right hand to support her without turning my gaze.

“…You’ve got some strange tastes. To think that the strongest player would suddenly become the most malignant final boss.”

“Don't you think that this is an interesting scenario? I had originally thought that this revelation would incite a wave of shock throughout Aincrad, but I had never thought that I would be found out only three-quarters of the way through the game. I knew that you were this game's most unpredictable factor, but I never imagined that you would have such potential.”

As the creator of this game who imprisoned the minds of ten thousand players, Kayaba Akihiko smiled in a way that I could still remember and shrugged. Kayaba's expressions were totally different from those of Heathcliff the Paladin. But that impenetrable, steely presence was somehow similar to that of the expressionless avatar which had descended upon us two years ago.

Kayaba continued with a bitter smile:

“…I had expected that you would be the player who would stand against me in the end. Out of the ten unique skills, «Dual Blades» is given to the player with the fastest reaction speed, who would then act out the hero's role against the final boss, regardless of whether he wins or loses. But you have shown me strength beyond my expectations, be it your speed or your insight. Well…I suppose that such unpredictable developments are part of the essence of online RPGs….”

At this moment, one of players who was frozen stood up slowly. He was one of the KoB leaders. His seemingly brusque eyes were filled with a tormented agony.

“You……you……how dare you take our loyalty—our hopes……and…and… completely defile them---!”

He raised his huge halberd into the air and launched himself with a scream. There wasn't even any time to try to stop him. We could only watch as he swung his weapon down at Kayaba---

But Kayaba was a step faster. He waved his left hand and quickly manipulated the window that appeared; the man immediately stopped in midair and then fell to the ground with a loud

noise. A green outline flashed around his HP bar, indicating paralysis. However, Kayaba didn't stop there and continued to move his hand.

“Ah…Kirito-kun…!”

I turned around and saw Asuna kneeling on the ground. It wasn’t just her either, as all the players except Kayaba and I were on the ground, groaning from awkward positions.

After sheathing my blades, I knelt down to prop up Asuna’s upper body with my arm and held her hand. Then I looked back at Kayaba.

“…What are you going to do? Are you going to kill us all to hide the truth…?”

“Of course not. I would never do something so unreasonable.”

The man in red smiled and shook his head.

“But since the situation has gotten to this point, I have no other choice. I will move my schedule forward and await for your arrival in the «Scarlet Jade Castle» on the top floor. It’s a shame that I must desert the KoB, as well as the other front-line players, that I had carefully cultivated to fight against the powerful mobs on the ninetieth floor and above. But I believe that all of you should have enough strength to reach the top level. But…before that…”

Kayaba suddenly stopped talking and turned his eyes, which were full of overwhelming will-power, to focus on me. He then drove his sword softly into the obsidian floor, and a sharp yet clear metallic ring resounded across the air.

“Kirito, since you figured out my true identity, I will reward you with an opportunity: you can have an one-on-one duel with me, right here and right now. Of course, I will negate my immortality status. If you win, the game will be cleared immediately, and all the players will be able to log out. What do you say…?”

As soon as she heard this, Asuna began to squirm in my arms, trying desperately to move her paralyzed body as she shook her head.

“No, Kirito-kun…! He’s trying to get rid of you first… right now… right now you have to back down…!”

My instincts told me that was the best course of action. This guy was an administrator who could intervene with the system. Even if he claimed that it would be a fair fight, there was no way to know whether or not he was somehow manipulating the system. The best choice would be to retreat now and come up with a countermeasure with the others.

But…

What did that guy say? That he raised the KoB? That we would surely be able to reach…?

“What a load of crap….”

I unconsciously muttered in a dry voice.

This guy confined the minds of ten thousand people in a world he had created, where he had already killed four thousand with electromagnetic waves. He had been watching the players struggle foolishly and pitifully according to the script he had written. This must be the most enjoyable experience available to a game master.

I thought of Asuna's past, which she had shared with me on the twenty-second floor. I remembered the tears she had shed while clutching me. The man before my eyes had created this world for his own joy and hurt Asuna's heart countless times, making it bleed profusely; there was no way I could just back down from this.

“Fine. Let’s settle this.”

I nodded slowly.

“Kirito-kun…!”

At Asuna’s stricken cry, I dropped my gaze to the figure in my arms. Pain pierced my heart as if my chest had been stabbed through, but somehow I managed to force a smile.

“Sorry. But I can't…run away right now….”

Asuna opened her mouth to say something, but then gave up halfway and tried her best to smile. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“You weren't planning… on sacrificing yourself…?”

“Of course… I’ll definitely win. I’ll win and put an end to this world.”

“Okay. I’ll trust you.”

Even if I lose and die, you must live on— although I wanted to say that, but I still couldn't force it out. I could only hold Asuna's right hand firmly in its stead.

After I released her hand, I laid Asuna's body down on the obsidian floor and then stood back up. I slowly approached Kayaba, who was silently looking upon us, and drew both my swords with a sharp sound.

“Kirito! Stop---!”

“Kirito---!”

When I turned my head towards the source of those voices, I saw Cline and Egil shouting and trying desperately to lift themselves up. I focused my sight upon Egil first and nodded slightly towards him.

“Egil, thanks for supporting the warrior class players up till now. I know that you had spent most of the money you earned to help the players on the middle floors.”

I smiled at the huge guy whose eyes were wide open before shifting my gaze again.

The katana warrior, with a simple bandana and fully-bearded cheeks, fumed on the floor as if he was still trying to find the words to say.

I gazed straight into those deep eyes of his and took a deep breath. This time, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't control my faltering voice.

“Cline. That time… I'm really sorry… about leaving you. I’ve always regretted it.”

As soon as I finished this short line in my hoarse voice, something twinkled at the corners of my old friend's eyes, and tears soon began to roll down one after another.

With tears still coming out of his eyes, Cline struggled to stand up while shouting loudly with a coarse voice that was about to break:

“You…you bastard! Kirito! Don’t apologize! Don’t apologize now! I won't forgive you! Until you invite me to a meal in the real world, I definitely won't forgive you!!”

I nodded at Cline, who wanted to continue shouting.

“Yeah, I promise. Next time, I'll see you on the other side.”

I raised my right hand and gave him a thumbs up.

Finally, I turned my gaze back to the girl who had allowed me to say the words that had been buried deeply within my heart for two years.

I looked upon the smiling Asuna whose face was covered by tears---

I muttered an apology to her inside my mind and turned back around. I faced Kayaba, who still had an expression of absolute superiority, and opened my mouth:

“…Sorry about this, but I have one thing to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t have any intention of losing, but if I die—can you prevent Asuna from committing suicide, even if only for a short period?”

Kayaba raised an eyebrow in surprise, but calmly nodded to my request.

“Okay. I’ll set it so that she won’t be able to leave Salemburg.”

“Kirito-kun, no!! You can't, you can't do this---!!”

Asuna screamed tearfully from behind me. But I didn’t look back. I shifted my right foot backwards, brought my left sword forward while lowering my right sword, and entered my stance.

Kayaba manipulated the window with his left hand and readjusted our HP bars to the same level. It was just before the red zone, where a single, strong hit would decide the fight.

After that, the system message [changed into mortal object] appeared above his head. Kayaba then closed the windows, pulled out the sword he had dug into the ground, and raised it behind his cross-shaped shield.

My mind was completely calm and clear. Thoughts like 'sorry, Asuna' bubbled away and scattered as I sharpened the fighting instinct within me into a razor's edge.

Frankly, I had no clue what my chances of winning were. If we were only talking about sword skills, then he wasn't any better than me based on the last duel. But that's only if he doesn't use his 'overassist,' during which only he would be able to move while I would be completely frozen in place.

It all depended on Kayaba's pride. Based on what he said, he was planning to defeat me with only the strength of «Holy Sword». If that was the case, my only chance of surviving this was to defeat him before he used any special abilities.

The space between me and Heathcliff tensed. It felt as if the air itself trembled under the pressure of the murderous intent pouring out of us. This was no longer a duel; it was a fight to the death. That’s right—I’m going to—

“Kill you…!!”

I shot forward with a sharp shout.

I swung my right sword horizontally as the distance closed. Kayaba blocked this easily with his shield. There was a spray of sparks and our faces were lit for a second.

It was as if the metallic clashing noise signaled the start of our fight; our weapons immediately accelerated to breakneck speeds and dominated the space around us.

This fight was the strangest, yet the most human fight that I'd partaken in up until now. Both of us had already shown our skills to each other. Furthermore, this was the person who designed «Dual Blades», thus he easily saw through any common skill combinations. That was why he had blocked all of my attacks during our last duel.

I couldn't rely upon the combos offered by the system; I had to depend on my own skills and instincts to swing my swords. Of course, I couldn't receive the system's assistance this way, but I could still move my arms at high speeds with the help of my accelerated senses. I could even see the afterimages, and it looked almost like there were several dozen swords in my hands. But—

Kayaba was blocking all of them with stunning accuracy. He also countered immediately whenever I showed even the slightest opening. The situation showed no sign of changing. I concentrated on Heathcliff's eyes in an attempt to read even a bit of the enemy's thoughts and reactions. We ended up exchanging glances as a result.

But Kayaba—Heathcliff's bronze eyes were cold and desolate. There wasn't a trace of the human emotions that he showed last time.

Suddenly a chill ran down my spine.

My opponent was someone who had mercilessly killed over four thousand people. Could a normal human being do such a thing? The deaths of four thousand, the resentment of four thousand, he could withstand such a pressure and still remain perfectly calm—he was no human, he was a monster.

"Aaaaaaah!"

I screamed to eliminate the small fragment of fear that had appeared in the depths of my mind. I accelerated my movements further and rained down countless blows upon him per second. But Kayaba's expression showed no change. He blocked all my attacks with his cross shield and long sword at speeds the naked eye couldn't even see.

Is he just toying with me---!?

My fear became nervousness. Was it possible that Kayaba only stayed on the defensive because he could actually counterattack whenever he wanted and was confident that he could survive even a direct hit from me?

The suspicion overtook my mind. He had never even needed the overassistance from the beginning.

"Damnit……!"

Then—how about this—?!

I changed my attack pattern and activated «The Eclipse», the highest level Dual Blades skill. Like the tips of an enveloping corona, my swords sent twenty-seven consecutive attacks towards Kayaba—

But— Kayaba had been waiting for me to use a combo skill designated by the system. His face revealed an expression for the first time since the start of the duel. It was completely opposite to the one he had shown last time—it was the smile of someone certain of his victory.

I realized my mistake as soon as I launched the opening attacks of the combo. In these final moments, I had relied on the system instead of myself. But it was already impossible for me to stop the skill, and once the attacks finish I would be subjected to a short delay. Furthermore, Kayaba saw through all my blows, from the start of the combo all the way to the last attack.

As I watched Kayaba swing his shield at blinding speeds, deflecting my swords with knowledge of exactly where each blow would land, I muttered in my mind:

Sorry—Asuna…. At least you must—stay alive—

The twenty-seventh attack struck the middle of the shield, sending out a shower of sparks. Then, with the shrill scream of metal, the sword in my left hand shattered.

“Well, this is goodbye—Kirito-kun.”

Kayaba raised his sword high above me as I stood stunned. A deep red shine glinted off the blade. The blood-red sword was then swung down at me—

At that moment, a strong, vibrant voice rang within my head.

I—will protect—Kirito-kun!!

The silhouette of a person charged in between Kayaba's red sword and me at an incredible speed. The long, chestnut-brown hair danced in the wind before my eyes.

Asuna—how—!?

She was standing in front of me even though she should be unable to move because of the paralysis. She bravely straightened her chest and opened her arms out wide.

An expression of shock exposed itself on Kayaba's face. But nobody could stop his attack now. Everything moved as if in slow motion as the long sword ripped its way down, through Asuna's shoulder and all the way into her chest before it stopped.

I reached out with both hands towards Asuna as she fell backwards towards me. She collapsed into my arms without a sound.

As her gaze met mine, Asuna gave a weak smile. Her HP bar—was depleted.

Time had stopped.

The sunset. The meadow. The gentle breeze. The slightly cold weather.

We were both sitting on a hill and looking down upon the lake as it shone with the deep golden red of the setting sun.

The sound of rustling leaves. The sound of birds returning to their nests.

She held my hand softly, then rested her head against my shoulder.

The clouds drifted by. Then the stars began to appear one by one, twinkling in the evening sky.

We gazed on as the world changed its colors bit by bit.

Then, she finally said something:

“I’m a little tired. Can I rest on your lap for a bit?”

I answered with a smile.

“Yeah, of course. Rest well—”

The Asuna in my arms now smiled at me just like that time, her eyes filled with endless affection. But the weight and warmth of that time had completely vanished.

Bit by bit, Asuna’s body was slowly engulfed by a golden light. The small shards of light began to collapse and scatter.

“This is just a joke right…Asuna…this…this is…”

I muttered with a trembling voice. But the uncaring light got brighter and brighter and then—

A single tear rolled down from Asuna’s eyes, which sparkled for a single moment before disappearing. Her lips moved slightly, slowly, as if she was trying to force her final voice out of them.

S o r r y

Y o u d i d g o o d

Her body began to float—

The blinding light exploded in my arms, transforming into numerous feathers that drifted across the air.

And not a trace of her body remained.

I screamed silently and tried desperately to gather the scattering light back into my arms. But the golden feathers flew up into the air as if blown by the wind, where they scattered and vanished. Just like that, she had disappeared.

This wasn't something that should have happened. It couldn't happen. It just couldn't. It just—

I knelt on the ground as if I was about to collapse, as the last feather floated down into my right palm and then disappeared.

Chapter 23

Kayaba pursed his lips and flaunted his arms dramatically.

“This is really surprising. Isn’t it just like a standalone console RPG scenario? It should have been impossible for her to recover from the paralysis… So things like this really do happen…”

But his voice didn’t even register in my mind. It felt as if all my emotions were being burnt out, as if I was falling into a bottomless abyss engulfed by despair.

There was no reason for me to do anything anymore.

Whether it was fighting in this world, returning to the original world, or even continuing to live on, all of them had lost their meaning. I should have killed myself in the past when my inability and lack of strength led to the death of my guild mates. If I had done that, then I wouldn't have met Asuna, nor would I have made the same mistake again.

Prevent Asuna from committing suicide— what a stupid and careless thing to say. I hadn't understood anything at all. Just like this— with my heart filled with emptiness, how could I possibly keep on living…

I stared blankly at Asuna’s rapier, shining as it laid on the ground. I reached out with my left hand and grabbed it.

I sought to find a trace of Asuna's existence on that thin and nimble weapon, but there was nothing. There wasn't a thing left on that expressionless shining surface that would hint at its owner. With my own sword in my right hand and Asuna's in my left, I slowly stood back up.

Nothing mattered anymore. I only want to go find her with the memories of the short period we spent living together.

I thought I heard somebody call me from behind.

But I didn’t stop and continued to walk towards Kayaba with my right sword raised. I took several unsightly steps towards him and stabbed with my sword.

Kayaba looked pitifully upon my movement, which could neither be called a skill nor an attack— he deflected my sword easily with his shield and sent it flying, while the long sword in his right hand pierced straight through my chest.

I stared emotionlessly at the shining piece of metal buried deeply within my own body. My mind no longer thought of anything. All that was left was the blank resignation that everything had ended.

From the edge of my vision, I could see my HP bar slowly reducing. I don't know if it was the continuation of my accelerated senses from the battle, but it felt like I could see each dot

disappearing. I closed my eyes, hoping that the image of Asuna's smile would resurface as my mind went blank.

But even though I closed my eyes, the HP bar still didn't disappear. It was flashing red and getting smaller at an unrelenting pace. I felt as if the god called the system, which had tolerated my existence up until now, was waiting for the final moment. Only ten dots left to go, now five dots, now—

Then, I suddenly felt an anger that I had never experienced before.

It was this bastard. It was the one who had killed Asuna. The creator Kayaba was merely a part of it. The one who had ripped apart Asuna's body and extinguished her spirit, it was the presence which surrounded me right now— the will of the system itself, the digital death god which mocked the stupidity of the players and swept its scythe mercilessly—

What the hell are we? Are we just a bunch of idiotic puppets controlled by the inviolable threads of the SAO system?

My HP bar vanished completely as if mocking my anger. A purple message appeared within my vision: [You are dead]. It was the command from the god to die.

An icy coldness permeated my body. My senses dulled. I felt the innumerable blocks of code unraveling, severing, and destroying my very being. The cold crept up my neck and into my head. Touch, sound, sight, everything became hazy. My entirely body was starting to dissolve— becoming shards of polygons— before scattering in all directions—

You think I would let that happen?

I opened my eyes widely. I could see. I could still see. I could still see the face of Kayaba, whose sword was dug deeply into my chest, and the expression of surprise on him.

Perhaps my accelerated senses returned, as the death of my avatar, which normally happened within a single moment, felt like it was slowing down. The outline of my body was hazy, and particles of light broke off and disappeared here and there. But I was still existing. I was still alive.

“Hiiiiyaaaa!”

I screamed with all my strength. I screamed and resisted. Resisting the system, the absolute god.

Just to save me, the shy and spoiled Asuna had shaken off the incurable paralysis with her willpower and thrown herself against an attack that was impossible to block. How could I fall now without doing anything. I couldn't fall now, absolutely not. Even if I couldn't avoid death— I had to— at least—

I tightened the grip on my left hand. I took back my senses as if pulling them back with a thread. The feeling of holding something in my left hand returned. Asuna's rapier— I could feel the determination she had. I could hear her telling me to be strong.

My left arm slowly began to move. Its shape was distorting and chunks of it broke off with every bit of movement. But it didn't stop. Bit by bit, it consumed my very soul in order to raise itself.

Perhaps it was the price of my insolent resistance, as an unbelievable pain was coursing throughout my body. But I gritted my teeth and kept on moving. The distance of merely tens of centimeters felt unbelievably far away. My body felt like it was frozen. Only my left arm had any feelings left, yet the coldness was quickly enveloping that part as well. My entire body was like an icy statue with shards of it continuously breaking off.

But at last, the silver rapier reached the center of Kayaba's chest. Kayaba didn't move. His expression of surprise had already disappeared— a soft, peaceful smile had taken its place.

My arm covered the remaining distance, half propelled by my determination, and half moving by some inexplicable force. Kayaba closed his eyes and received the blow as the rapier pierced his body soundlessly. His HP bar had also vanished.

For a moment, we simply stood there, with swords that penetrated each others' bodies. I used the last of my strength to force my head up and look at the sky.

Is this—enough…?

Although I couldn't hear her answer, I could feel a slight warmth wrap itself around my left hand. Finally, I released my body, which was about to shatter completely.

As my mind sank deeper into the darkness, I could feel mine and Kayaba's bodies breaking into thousands of pieces at the same time. The familiar sound of two objects being destroyed rang out and overlapped one another. As everything pulled further and further away at an incredible speed, I could hear faint voices calling my name. I figured those must be the voices of Cline and Egil. Then, at this moment, the emotionless voice of the system announced—

The game has been cleared—the game has been cleared—the game…

Chapter 24

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in an otherworldly place.

Here, the sunset made the entire sky seem as if it was burning.

I was standing on a thick crystal floor. The orange clouds rolled past slowly beneath the transparent tiles. When I raised my head, I could see a sky dyed by the sunset reach as far as the horizon. As it spread outwards, the endless skies faded from bright orange, to a bloody red, then to a shade of purple. I could also faintly hear the wind blowing.

It was a small, round disk of crystal which floated amongst the clouds in the empty skies; here I stood on its edge.

…What is this place? My body should have disappeared after shattering. Was I still in SAO… or did I arrive in the afterlife?

I examined my own body. The leather coat, long gloves, and all my other equipment were the same as before I had died, except that everything had become somewhat transparent. It wasn't just my equipment either, as even the exposed sections of my body shined with the sunset colors as if it was made of semi-transparent glass.

I raised my right hand and waved a finger about. A window appeared with the familiar sound effect. So, this place was still inside SAO.

But the window contained neither an avatar nor a menu list. The blank screen showed only the message [Executing the Final Phase, 54% completed]. As I stared at it, the number went up to 55%. I had originally thought that my mind would die alongside the destruction of my body, but what was going on here?

As I shrugged and closed the window, I suddenly heard a voice behind me.

“Kirito-kun…”

It was like a voice from heaven. Shock coursed through my body.

Please don’t let this be my imagination—I begged as I slowly turned around.

She stood there with the burning sky behind her.

Her long hair was drifting softly in the wind. But even though her gentle, smiling face was within my arms' reach, I could not move the slightest.

It felt as if she would disappear if my gaze left her even for a second— so I simply kept staring at her in silence. She was also semi-transparent, and was the most beautiful thing in the world as she stood there, shining in the light of the setting sun.

I forcibly held back my tears and managed to form a smile. In an almost-whispered voice, I said:

“Sorry. I died as well…”

“…Idiot.”

Tears ran down her face as she said this with a smile. I spread my arms wide open and gently called out her name:

“Asuna…”

I held her tightly as she flew into my arms and cried. I swore that I wouldn't let go again. No matter what happened, I would never ever let go again.

After a long kiss, we finally managed to pull our faces apart to look at each other. There were so many things about the final battle that I wanted to talk to her about, that I wanted to apologize to her about. But I felt like there was no longer any need for words. Instead, I shifted my gaze towards the endless skies and opened my mouth:

“This… just what is this place?”

Asuna silently turned her gaze downwards and pointed with her fingers. I looked in that direction.

Far below where we were— something floated in the skies. It was shaped like a cone with the tip cut off. It was made from numerous floors overlapping one another. As I focused my eyes, I could even see the small mountains, forests, lakes, and cities.

“Aincrad…”

Asuna nodded as I muttered this. There was no mistaking it. It was Aincrad. The huge floating castle drifted amongst the endless skies. We had spent two years fighting within that world of swords and battles, yet now it was below us.

I had seen the outside of Aincrad before I came to this world in some information about SAO. But this was the first time that I saw its outside with my own two eyes. I held my breath as an awe-inspiring feeling overcame me.

The steel castle—was being destroyed.

Even as we watched silently, a section of the lowest floor scattered into countless shards. As I focused my ears to listen, I could still hear the thunderous noise dispersing amongst the winds.

“Ah…”

Asuna exclaimed softly. A large portion of the lower floors broke off, and the countless buildings, trees, and rivers all fell off and disappeared into the sea of clouds. Our house was somewhere in that area. I felt a bittersweet sorrow pierce my chest each time a floor of the castle that held two years' worth of memories disappeared.

I sat down at the edge of the platform with Asuna in my arms.

I was feeling unusually calm. Even though I didn't know what had happened to us or what was going to happen now, I didn't feel the slightest bit of anxiety. I had accomplished what I should do, and for that I had lost my virtual life and was now watching the end of this world with the girl I loved. This was enough— my heart was content.

Asuna must have felt the same way. Within my arms, she watched Aincrad collapse with her eyes half open. I softly stroked her hair.

“An impressive sight.”

Suddenly I could hear a voice beside us. When Asuna and I turned to the right, we saw a man standing there.

It was Kayaba Akihiko.

He appeared not as the red paladin Heathcliff, but in his real form as the developer of SAO. He wore a white shirt with a necktie and white overalls on top. Only the two metallic eyes on his sharp face felt exactly the same. But those two eyes were filled with a gentle light as they looked upon the disappearing castle. His body was also semi-transparent like ours.

Even though I had fought to the death with this man just minutes prior, my calmness continued to persist after seeing him. Maybe we had left behind all of our anger and hate in Aincrad before we came to this place. I turned my gaze away from Kayaba and back onto the castle.

“What exactly is going on?”

“Perhaps you can call it… a metaphorical rendering.”

Kayaba’s voice was also quite peaceful.

“Currently, the SAO mainframe that’s stationed in the fifth basement floor of Argas headquarters is in the midst of erasing all data from its memory banks. In another ten minutes, this world will be completely erased.”

“What about the people who lived there… what happened to them?”

Asuna suddenly asked.

“There’s no need to worry. Just a moment ago---”

Kayaba moved his right hand and took a glance at the window that appeared.

“All of the remaining 6,147 players have been successfully logged out.”

Then this meant Cline, Egil, and all the other people whom I had come to know during these two years had managed to return safely to the other side.

I firmly closed my eyes and allowed my tears to flow before asking:

"…What about those who died? Both of us are already dead, yet we continue to exist here. Doesn't that mean you can return the other four thousand dead to the original world as well?"

Kayaba's expression didn't change. He closed the window, put his hands into his pockets, and then said:

"Life can't be recovered so easily. Their consciousness will never return. The dead will disappear— this fact remains true in every world. I created this place only because I wanted to talk with you two—one last time."

Was that something that somebody who had killed four thousand people should be saying? Although I thought that, I didn't feel any anger for some strange reason. Instead, another question popped into my mind. It was a fundamental question which all the players, no, everyone who knew about this incident would have asked.

"Why—did you do this…?"

I could feel Kayaba smile bitterly. After a long silence, he finally spoke:

"Why— I had forgotten a long time ago. Just why did I do it? Ever since I found out that a FullDive system was being created—no, even before that, I had wanted to build that castle, a place that exceeded the limits set upon the real world. Then, in those final moments… I saw even the rules of my world being surpassed as well…"

Kayaba first turned his peaceful eyes towards me, and then immediately shifted them away.

Kayaba's overalls and Asuna's hair fluttered as the wind grew stronger. Half of the castle had already been destroyed. Algade, a city full of my memories, was being scattered into the wind and absorbed by the clouds.

Kayaba continued to speak:

"Don't we all have many dreams since the time we were kids? I have already forgotten how old I was when the image of a steel castle floating in the skies began to enrapture me… it was a vision that didn't fade from my mind no matter how much time passed. As I grew older, the image became more and more realistic, more and more expansive. Leaving the real world and flying straight into this castle… that was my only dream for a long time. You know, Kirito-kun, I still believe— that in some other world, this castle really does exist—"

Suddenly, I felt as if I had been born in that world, where I dreamed of becoming a swordsman. The boy would one day meet a girl with hazelnut-brown eyes. The two would fall in love, finally get married, and live happily ever after in a small house in the middle of a forest—

"Yeah… that would be be nice."

I murmured. Asuna nodded in my arms as well.

Silence returned between us. I turned my gaze towards the distance again and saw that other parts of the castle had began to collapse. I could see the endless sea of clouds and red skies being consumed by a white light far away. The erosion had began in all directions and was slowly coming this way.

“Ah, I forgot to mention this. Kirito-kun, Asuna-kun… congratulations on clearing the game.”

We looked up at Kayaba when he said this. He looked down upon us with a calm expression on his face.

“Well then—I should be going now.”

The wind blew and seemingly swept away his figure— by the time we noticed, he was no longer anywhere in sight. Only the red setting sun continued to shine through the crystal plate. We were alone once again.

I wonder where he went? Did he return to the real world?

No—he wouldn’t have. He would have erased his own mind and left to find the real Aincrad in some other world.

Only the top part of the castle remained now. The seventy-sixth floor that we never had a chance to see started to collapse. The veil of light that was erasing this world gradually approached us. As the wavering aura touched the clouds and the skies, they disappeared and returned to nothingness.

I could see the red palace and its magnificent spires on the highest floor of Aincrad. If the game had proceeded as planned, we would have fought there against the final boss, Heathcliff.

Even as the foundation of the top floor disappeared, the ownerless palace continued to float in the air as if resisting its fate. The red palace that was left in the middle of the orange sky seemed like the heart of the floating castle.

Eventually, the destruction engulfed the red palace as well. It broke apart, starting from the bottom and travelling upwards, and scattered into innumerable fragments before disappearing amongst the clouds. The highest tower disappeared at almost the same time as when the veil of light consumed its surroundings. The enormous castle of Aincrad had been completely destroyed, and all that remained in this world were a few clouds and this small platform where Asuna and I sat.

We probably didn't have much time remaining. We were using only the short period of time that Kayaba had given us. With the destruction of this world, the Nerve Gear would carry out its final function and erase all that remained of us.

I placed my hands on Asuna’s cheeks and slowly pressed my lips over hers. This was our final kiss. I sought to use up every last second and engrave her very being onto my soul.

“I suppose this is goodbye…”

Asuna shook her head.

“No, it isn’t. We’ll be disappearing together. So, we’ll be together, forever.”

She whispered in a clear voice before turning around in my arms to stare straight at me. Then she tilted her head a little and smiled.

“Hey, can you tell me your name Kirito-kun? Your real name?”

I didn’t understand at first, but then I realized that she meant my name in the other world which I had left behind two years ago.

It felt as if the days where I had lived with another name and another life were tales from some distant world. I spoke my name as it drifted up from the bottom of my memory, feeling somehow emotional.

“Kirigaya… Kirigaya Kazuto. I should have turned sixteen last month.”

At that moment, I felt time started ticking for the other me. The mind of Kazuto, which had been deeply buried within the swordsman Kirito, drifted up slowly. I felt the hard armor that I had surrounded myself with in this world fall off piece by piece.

“Kirigaya…Kazuto-kun….”

Asuna voiced my name, concentrating on every syllable, then laughed with a slightly perplexed expression.

“So you’re younger than me. I’m… Yuuki… Asuna. Seventeen this year.”

Yuuki… Asuna. Yuuki Asuna. I repeated these five syllables in my mind over and over again.

Suddenly, I became aware of the tears rolling down my cheeks.

My emotions began to shift at last in the middle of this perpetual sunset. A painful feeling coursed through my whole being, as if my heart was tearing apart. For the first time since my arrival in this world, tears flowed freely down my cheeks. I felt a lump in my throat, clenched both my hands, and began to cry loudly like a little kid.

“I’m sorry… sorry…. I promised…to send… you back… to the other side… but I…”

I wasn’t able to continue. In the end, I couldn't save the person who was most precious to me. Because of my own weakness, her once bright and sunny path had come to a close. My regrets took the form of my tears and poured down endlessly from my eyes.

“It’s alright… it’s alright…”

Asuna was crying too. Her sparkling tears rolled down endlessly like small jewels before evaporating.

“I was really happy. The time I met Kazuto-kun, and lived together, was the most enjoyable time in my entire life. Thank you… I love you…”

The end of the world was right in front of us. The steel castle and the endless sea of clouds had all been erased by the bright light, leaving only the two of us behind.

Asuna and I hugged each other tightly, waiting for the final moment.

It felt as if our emotions were being purified by the light. All that remained inside of me was my love for Asuna. I continued to call out her name even as everything was being unraveled and scattered.

Light filled my vision. Everything was being covered by the pure white veil and disappeared after becoming tiny particles of light. Asuna’s smile mixed in with the overflowing light that engulfed this world.

—I love you… I love you—

Her voice rang out like the sweet chiming of a bell as the last of my consciousness disappeared.

The final line that separated us disappeared and we became one.

Our souls seeped into each other, combined, and then scattered.

Finally, we disappeared.

Chapter 25

The air was a mixture of numerous odors.

The fact that I was still alive shocked me.

The air that flowed into my nose was bringing in an abundance of information. First came the stinging smell of disinfectant. Then came the smell of sun-dried cloth, the sweet aroma of fruits, and the odor of my own body.

I slowly opened my eyes. For a moment, it felt like two powerful white beams of light pierced deeply into my mind, so I quickly shut my eyes again.

Sometime later, I hesitantly tried to open my eyes again. A myriad of colors danced across my pupils. It was only then did I notice that there was a large amount of liquid covering my eyes.

I blinked in an attempt to get rid of them. But the liquid kept flowing out. They were actually tears.

I was crying. Why? There was a fierce but deep feeling of pain and loss within my heart. Voices continued to echo within my ears, as if someone was calling my name.

I squinted my eyes against the strong light and finally managed to get rid of the tears.

It felt like I was lying on something soft. I could see something akin to ceiling tiles above me. There were rows of smooth, beige colored panels, several of which shined softly as if there were lights behind them. From the edge of my vision, I could see a metallic vent, where air was being blown out with a low sound.

An air conditioner… in other words, a machine. How could something like that be here? No smith could make a machine no matter how high their skill stats were. If what I saw was really a machine— then this place wasn't—

It wasn’t Aincrad.

I opened my eyes widely. My mind was fully awoken from just that one thought. I hurried to raise my body—

But my body wouldn't listen at all. I couldn’t apply any strength. Although my right shoulder went up by a couple of centimeters, it immediately fell back down.

Only my right hand managed to move. I raised it onto my body and then brought it in front of my eyes.

For a moment I couldn't believe that this emaciated arm was mine. There was no way I would be able to hold a sword with this. When I inspected the sickly white skin more closely, I could see countless tufts of body hair covering it. I could see the blue veins below the skin

and the wrinkles at the joints. Everything felt frightening; it was so realistic, so biological that it felt abnormal.

On the inside of my wrist, a piece of tape held a needle in place, which had a long cord connected to it like it was used to inject something. My eyes followed the cord and came upon a transparent package that was held up by a silver stand. The pack was still two-thirds full with some orange liquid, which dripped away at a steady pace.

I moved my left hand and tried to grasp my sense of touch. It seemed that my entire body was naked and lying on top of a bed made of some high density gel material. Because its temperature was slightly lower than my body's, I could feel its coldness slowly creep up to me. Suddenly, a memory surfaced in my mind; I once saw on a news broadcast that this type of bed had been developed for patients who couldn't move. It had the ability to prevent infections to the skin and break down disposed bodily wastes.

I looked around at my surroundings. It was a small room. The wall was of the same plain white color as the ceiling. There was an extraordinarily large window to my right with white curtains drawn over it. I couldn't see the scenery outside, but I could see the yellow sunlight shine straight through the fabric. A four-wheeled metal trolley parked to the far left of the gel bed, and a rattan basket laid on top of it. A bouquet of plain-looking flowers was inside the basket, which seemed to be the source of the sweet aroma. Past the trolley was a closed, rectangular door.

Based on all of this information, this place should be a hospital ward, and I was the only one here.

I returned my gaze to my raised right hand and suddenly thought of something. I waved my right hand with my index finger and thumb pressed together.

Nothing happened. There was neither a sound effect nor a menu screen. I waved again with a bit more strength, then again. The outcome was the same each time.

So, this really wasn’t SAO. Then was it some other virtual reality?

But the information flooding through my five senses already shouted to me that there was another possibility. This— was the real world. It was the world I had left two years ago and never expected to see again.

The real world— It took me a long time to understand the meaning behind these simple words. For me, the world of swords and battles had been my only reality for a long time. I still couldn't believe that the other world was no longer there, that I was no longer in that world.

Then, have I returned?

—Even when I thought of that, I didn’t really feel happy or anything. All I felt was a bit of confusion and a sense of loss.

Was this the reward that Kayaba had mentioned for clearing the game? I had clearly died within that world and my body had been completely erased. I had accepted that. I even felt content about it.

Yeah—it would have been fine if I had just disappeared like that. In that bright light, dissolving, scattering, and then melting away with the rest of the world, together with her—

“Ah…”

I subconsciously made a noise. A strong pain pierced the throat that hadn't been used in two years. But I didn't care about that in the slightest. I opened my eyes widely and said one word, the one name that appeared in my mind.

“A…su…na…”

Asuna. The pain that was etched onto my heart flared up once again. Asuna, my beloved wife, who watched the end of the world together with me…

Had it all been a dream…? A beautiful illusion that I saw in a virtual world…? These confused thoughts suddenly appeared in my mind.

No, she did exist. There was no way that all those days we had spent laughing, crying, and sleeping together had been a dream.

Kayaba had said—“Congratulations on clearing the game Kirito-kun, Asuna-kun.” He had definitely said that. If he had included me in the list of survivors, then Asuna should have came back to this world as well.

As soon as I thought this, my love and my yearning for her overflowed inside me. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to touch her hair. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to hear her voice calling my name.

I strained all the muscles in my body and tried to get up. Only then did I realize that my head was strapped down. I fumbled around with my fingers before finding a belt clasp below my chin and undoing it. There was something heavy on my head. I used both my hands and barely managed to take it off.

I sat up and stared at the thing in my hands. It was a smooth, deep blue helmet. A wire of the same color stretched out of a long pad at the back and went all the way down to the floor. It was—

Nerve Gear. I had been stuck in that world for two years because of this. Its power had been turned off. My last memory of it had been that of a shining helmet; but now the color had faded. Bits of it had come off and you could see the metal alloy that it was made of.

All my memories of the other world were held within this— I was suddenly seized by this thought and caressed the surface of the helmet.

I suppose I would never be putting this on again. But it fulfilled its purpose really well…

I muttered in my mind before placing the helmet on the bed. The days when I fought together with it were already a thing of the past. There was something else I needed to do in this world now.

I was suddenly aware of the noises outside. When I strained my ears, I could hear various sounds, as if they were telling me that my hearing had finally returned to normal.

I definitely heard the voices of people talking and shouting. I also heard the sounds of hurried footsteps and the wheels of beds as they were moved.

There was no way to know if Asuna was in this hospital. SAO players came from all across Japan, so the chances of her being here were low. But I would begin my search here. No matter how long it took, I would definitely find her.

I pulled the blanket off of me. There were numerous cords spread across my weak body. Maybe they were electrodes placed to slow down the degeneration of my muscles. I managed to pull all of them off. An orange LED flickered on the panel at the edge of my bed and a loud alarm went off, but I ignored all of this.

I pulled the IV drip needle out and finally freed my body. Then I placed my feet on the floor and slowly applied my strength in an attempt to stand up. My body rose bit by bit, but it felt like my knees would give way any minute and this made me smile bitterly; my superhuman strength stat was nowhere to be found.

I grabbed onto the IV drip stand for support and finally managed to stand up. Looking around the room, I found a folded hospital gown on the same tray as the basket of flowers and put it on.

After completing these simple movements, my breath was already ragged. The muscles that I hadn’t used for two years were already protesting with pain. But I can’t complain so easily.

Quickly, quickly, I could hear a voice urging me to keep going. My whole being longed for her. My fight wasn't over until I had Asuna—Yuuki Asuna in my arms.

With a tight grip on the stand instead of a sword, I leaned my body against it and took my first step towards the door.

([Sword Art Online] 1 The End)

Author's Notes

I wrote Sword Art Online for the Dengeki Light Novel Award[4] seven years ago in 2002, and it was the first novel I ever wrote.

But when I somehow managed to complete it, the manuscript was far longer than 120 pages, which was the cutline back then. Since I had neither the skill nor the will to trim this down to fit the cutline, I kneeled facing the wall and muttered "I don't care anymore..."

But because of my weak personality, I couldn't erase the whole manuscript and simply thought "why don't I post this up on the internet then?"; I made a website that fall. Luckily I was able to receive good responses from a lot of people. With this as my motivation, I kept on going with the series; I wrote a sequel, a side-story, and then another sequel. I carried on like this and before I knew it, six years had already passed.

It was 2008 when I decided to try again. I wrote another story (which was once again far longer than the cutline, but I barely managed to trim it down to 120 pages) and then entered it to the Dengeki Light Novel Award. Thanks to some overwhelming good luck, I managed to receive the grand prize. But my luck didn't just end there. I still can't forget the happiness and excitement I felt when my editor read the <SAO> that I kept stacking up thoughtlessly.

It was true that I felt a little anxious as well. That was because there were so many problems with this story that I can't even begin to list them here. The biggest reason was my hesitation about "is it really alright to take everything I wrote up and just publish them?"

But the reason I managed to reach the decision to publish this was because the timing was so good: I had just finished writing, society had just started to become publicly aware of online games, and most of all thanks to Miki <his lover is work> Kazuma-san (I was shocked by how he managed to get through my manuscript even with his busy schedule). I would never have been able to get this story published if it wasn't for these reasons. But if I didn't seize this lucky chain of events I would never be a gamer…I mean author! That was the conclusion I reached and I was finally able to get <Sword Art Online 1: Aincrad> published on paper.

This story was the starting point for me, who kept writing with the theme "isn't an online game also another reality?" I hope I would be able to reach the end of this road with all of you readers.

I offer my sincere thanks to Abec-san, who managed to color this story with countless great designs and draw the characters who fought here so vividly despite the difficult setting of 'a near-future virtual reality fantasy game', and also to my editor Miki-san, who thoroughly read my problem-ridden draft and managed to give a new life to this story.

Also, I would like to thank all the people who urged me on for so long while reading <Sword Art Online> on my site. If it wasn't for your encouragement, <Kawahara Reki> would never have been able to come out into this world, let alone this book.

And finally, I offer my greatest thanks to everyone who read this book until the end!

January 28th 2009, Kawahara Reki.

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

ソーサリア出身、アゼロス在住。人生ソロプレイヤー。パーティーメンバーなんていらないと強がっていたものの、最近色んなクエストの難易度が上がってきて大変。ソロカラオケは一生無理ですがソロ焼肉くらいいけるレベルになりたいです。

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あべしっ！

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